# A World In Edgewise

13 Sidereal Journeys

Jack Preston King

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*Thirteen Sidereal Journeys*

By Jack Preston King

Published by New Paradigm Press

A World In Edgewise: Thirteen Sidereal Journeys

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## What Reviewers Are Saying

*I recommend this collection to anyone who enjoys well-crafted and somewhat mind-bending science fiction. It is more the psychological variety of SF than the "nuts and bolts" kind, but in my book that's a good thing. If you prefer reading about deeply realized, often troubled, but always interesting human characters over shiny spaceships and aliens with laser guns, this is the book for you.*

*NOTE: This is definitely NOT a book written for kids. There's sex, some violence, and more than one reference to drug use scattered throughout. I'm no prude - I loved it! But don't buy this for your 13 year old, Capiche?* - Janet Erinda, Amazon.com Review

# # #

*The stories in Jack Preston King's* A World In Edgewise *alternately disturb me, haunt me, make me think, and send sinfully titillating tingles of delight running up and down my spine, often delivering all of these sensations at once.* - Harold Zo, author of Zo-Zen: Zen Buddhist Essays and Insights from the Small Town "Big Mind" of Harold Zo.

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# Contents

Introduction: *Soon to Be a Major Motion Picture!* 9
A World In Edgewise 15
Heritage 28
Or Memories Draped by the Tyrannical Spider 47
Be a Kathy Girl! 56
Who Is The Fish? 65
The Return of Horselover Fat 92
The Last Dinosaur 103
Virgil's Reason (An Alternate Inferno) 111
Manifest Destiny, Inc. 135
A Chameleon's True Color 149
Missing Time 176
Friendly Fire 181
Mercuria Rising 186
Publication Credits 203
Connect with Jack Preston King 205

# Introduction:
# Soon To Be a Major Motion Picture!

You might, at first glance, consider "sidereal" in the subtitle of this book - *13 Sidereal Journeys* - to be a poor choice of words, as the literal meaning of that word is *"of or concerned with the stars"* - and not a single story in this collection, as you will discover, has anything to do with the stars, or space or anything in or near that celestial ballpark. In fact, while all of these stories that have seen previous publication (7 out of 13) appeared in science fiction or horror magazines, none of them are technically either of the above. *Manifest Destiny, Inc.* might qualify as science fiction, since parts of it take place on other planets, but you'd have to ignore the fact that the "science" is really a thinly-veiled theological metaphor. *Or Memories Draped by the Tyrannical Spider* might be found horrific by some because it has a monster in it, but to get there they'd have to stop thinking long enough to laugh, and stop laughing long enough to be scared. And even these two stories barely squeak by as stereotypical "genre pieces." What I have really been writing, since I began putting words to paper seriously around 1988, is my personal brand of *Magical Realism,* in which people, places and things are not what they appear to be, reality not only refuses to stand still, it does occasional gymnastics around confused protagonists.

Now rest assured, gentle reader, that Magical Realism is not the same as surrealism, nor is it some kind of mere schizoid blathering. Magical Realism is generally subtler, more gentle and literary in its approach to exploring the fringes of human experience - though it can, on occasion, be over the top, as well. The best known Magical Realists would probably be the South American writers Gabriel Garcia Marquez (*100 Years of Solitude*) and Jorges Louis Borges (The Aleph & Other Stories). A couple of North American authors

trafficking in or around Magical Realism would be Thomas Pynchon (*The Crying of Lot 49, Vineland*) and Philip K. Dick, author of *The Man in the High Castle, The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldridtch, VALIS, A Scanner Darkly* and about 50 other truly magical science fiction novels.

All this to say that some very strange stories lie in wait for you in these pages, stories, hopefully, like none that you have ever read before.

My dictionary has a second definition for "sidereal": *Measured in reference to the apparent motion of the stars.* In this, we come closer to my reason for including that word in the title of this collection. We are all moving in reference to the apparent motion of *something* - significant others, employers, religions, governments, cultures - the list of "realities" we measure ourselves by and against is a long one, and personal to each of us. But by what process do we select the measuring rods we will label "real" for ourselves? To what degree do our choices connect us to or separate us from other people and "consensus reality?" And what happens to us if our chosen "realities" prove unreal?

If there is one overriding theme to the stories in this volume, it is this: *An ordinary Joe (or Joann) faces extraordinary circumstances, and discovers that everything he/she thought was real is not. He/She must then be transformed to survive.* This is literature of transformation. It is probably, by U.S. standards, science fiction, if you count psychology - literally the science (or study) of the soul - as the science. It is my humble desire that these stories will qualify with you as, if nothing more, at least interesting, maybe even memorable. There's not much more I could ask...

* * *

**BUT WAIT!** There is one more thing I could ask:

***I WANT A MOVIE!***

What motivated me to write these stories in the first place was my own inner sense of confusion, transformation, and of personally

inhabiting a reality not quite in the mainstream - a side-reality for sure. Some of the stories got published; others languished in a desk drawer. I was all along more motivated to write these stories than to publish them, in part because I realized early on that very few markets existed for the kind of stories I was writing - literary journals called them "too SciFi," while the science fiction mags said, "not SciFi enough." But, having seen a remarkable number of "side-real" films in recent years (*The Matrix, The Crow, Total Recall*, even very "literary" independent films like Paul Auster's *Lulu on the Bridge*), it finally dawned on me that the kind of stories I was writing were exactly the type Hollywood loved to make into movies. TV shows like *The X Files* for many top-rated years trafficked almost exclusively in the question *"What is real?"* All at once I recognized that there is a place in our culture for the stories I tell - it's just not where I was trying to tell them - on paper, to the daily-shrinking pool of Americans who read.

But everybody watches movies. I am, myself, an avid movie buff. I ran a video rental store for half a decade. I love movies - TV, too, when it's well done. Nothing would please me more than to see my stories adapted to the big or small screen.

It's something of a New Age commonism to believe that, to manifest your desires in reality, you must first clearly visualize what you want, then, without hesitation or fear, announce your vision to the Universe – so here goes:

***I WANT A MOVIE*** (or two or three or four...)!!!

I can see it clearly. I can easily visualize Hollywood sinking its teeth (and big special effects budget) into *A World in Edgewise, Manifest Destiny, Inc., Virgil's Reason* (An Alternate Inferno), *A Chameleon's True Color* or *Mercuria, Rising*. In my vision, episodic TV snaps up *Heritage, Or Memories Draped by the Tyrannical Spider*, *Be a Kathy Girl!*, and *Friendly Fire*. Meanwhile, adventurous independent filmmakers around the globe compete to translate the raucous *Who is the Fish?* (the first "serious" story I ever wrote, and still among my favorites), the quiet *Last Dinosaur*, the apocalyptic *Return of*

*Horselover Fat*, and the ethereal *Missing Time* to the silver screen, with visions of Sundance haunting their dreams...

Now, help me, gentle reader! If you are a filmmaker in search of material to adapt, please take a serious look at the contents of this collection. If you are not a filmmaker, but run in the Hollywood or Indy film loop, please bring this book to the attention of the right people, that my dream may come true.

And finally, if you stand wholly outside the filmmaking and publishing communities, being one of those rare and precious creatures - the serious reader - who has found his or her way to this book purely out of a desire to imbibe some unusual short fiction, then I thank you for joining me here, and wish you safe passage through these thirteen doors into strange lands. May you find what you came for!

# A World In Edgewise

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# A World In Edgewise

Lightning carved a name into the black night sky, then erased it before his eyes could focus. Rain against the glass patio doors became a fist, an urgent wall of water pounding and boiling just beyond his nose, fighting to reach him with its baptismal fury. Danny Tripp began to count; the number of seconds times seven told you how many miles...

Thunder struck behind him, like a door banging open.

"Would you guys please keep it down in there? I'm trying to sleep!"

Negative vibes. Guilt.

In fast motion Jeff shot off the couch and disappeared from the room, following the voice.

Danny spun away from the night. "Hey, man, wait..." But it was too late. Jeff was gone.

Ghostly voices drifted into the room to hang before him like shimmering vapor. Apologies and promises, kissing and snuggling hovered there briefly, then sank into the carpet with a sigh.

Glowing orange clouds of togetherness rolled in from the hallway, but they would not approach him. *Alone, alone alone…*They skittered off and vanished through the wall.

*Whisper, whisper, cuddle cuddle...* Unintelligible words drifted in from the hallway.

You're a loser, Danny Tripp translated to himself. You're a loser and your friend Danny Tripp is the kind of filth that would turn on his girl when she needed him most. Would you do that? No, Honey, never. Only Danny Tripp. He deserves to be alone. He deserves to be squashed like the miserable crawling insect that he is...

The transformation began. Danny shrieked as the backs of his hands split and peeled away. Long, jointed tendrils sprang out of his wrists. A fine network of sensitive dark hairs glistened wetly in the candlelight.

Black clouds of accusation rose up before him, chanting *Insect... Insect... Squash him like an insect...*

He fought his way to the couch. The split in his hands moved up both arms, joined at the neck, then traced a wide gash down the center of his chest.

*Help!* he tried to shout, but the sound he made was *Click click click! Chkata! Chkata!*

The black clouds laughed and their laughter made the gash tear a zipper of fire down his legs. The whole of his skin fell away in two dead, curving flakes. A shiny new skin pushed through - a carapace, hard, chitinous, insectoid, black like the night. He folded his delicate new legs beneath him and watched a thousand swirling facets blend as the clouds before him shifted and solidified into Jeff and the girl.

They had stopped laughing.

"You okay, man?"

Soothing globs of blue light poured from Jeff's mouth as he spoke. The globs of light busied themselves about the room, twisting reality gradually back to its old, familiar shape. The girl mutely studied a worn spot in the carpet, her face red.

"What!" Danny demanded. "Why are you staring at me?"

"Jeez, Danny, you're naked."

Danny Tripp looked down at himself all folded up on the couch - long, pink arms, hairy legs, big feet: five toes on each. He blushed and dropped his hands over his lap.

"You're right," he said. "How about that?"

Jeff's girlfriend laughed, and first Jeff and then Danny joined in.

"Man, you are messed up," Jeff said.

"Yep," Danny agreed. He let out a long, pain-filled sigh. "I am, indeed, messed up."

A peel of thunder shook the patio doors beside them, sending the girl into new fits of chittering laughter. This time, Danny didn't join in.

* * *

“He almost came through, didn't he?" Light from the small campfire made the girl's black hair glow a sullen, angry red. She pulled her knees tight under her chin.

"Almost," the Companion said across the fire.

"But where did all that weird stuff come from?" she asked. "Why an insect? I didn't do that."

The Companion shrugged. "Maybe you did. You’re still angry."

The girl said nothing. Thunder still rumbled faint circles around the horizon.

"He doesn't want to remember, you know. He's built a wall of self-pity that..."

*”Him him him!”* The girl shot to her feet and spun away from the fire. The distant thunder rolled closer, simmered for a moment above them, then gradually retreated. It hung stubbornly in the distance, refusing to vanish altogether.

"Why do you want to call him here if you haven't yet forgiven? It's the first rule. You know that."

"I miss him," she answered softly. The air around them hung suddenly heavy with silence. The fire flared skyward, filling the gap between them with a soothing crackle of sparks. "And I have forgiven. I just haven't forgotten."

The fire fell. A cold wind lifted leaves into spirals at her feet.

"I can never forget."

* * *

"She says all we ever do is get high." Jeff laughed, a short, guttural burst, then stared down again into his folded hands. "She says you're a bad influence."

"She's right." Danny folded his own hands behind his back and moved to stand before the glass patio doors. Cars moved in and out of the convenience store lot across the street without pattern or plan. A ratty brown dog begged each exiting customer for scraps, accepting hot dog buns and doughnut holes with sycophantic glee, then returning after each round to its post beside the trash can. The dog suddenly turned its head to stare in Danny's direction as if aware of his presence. Danny laughed. "I'm just a stray, man. A mangy stray. Put me out on the street where I belong."

"It's not like that and you know it." Anger and frustration blended in Jeff's voice, twisting it into a complaining squeak. "But dammit, Danny, she lives here, too. She pays half the rent. She..."

*... lays down*, Danny almost finished for him - but as Jeff was speaking, across the street, a man in a white uniform had put a paper plate on the concrete in front of the dog, and when the dog's head was down, he'd slipped a chain around its neck. Now they were walking together toward a white van with square, mesh-screened windows cut into the sides. The dog's tail was wagging frantically. It leaped into the van as soon as the door opened.

*Run!* Danny thought to the dog, *get out of there now...*

Jeff was suddenly standing at his side. "That's too bad. I liked that dog." His voice dropped to a near-whisper that somehow retained its complaining edge. "Look, Danny, I've got a life here. I work hard..."

The dog had, at first, reminded Danny of himself, sitting there all alone, lonely but uncompromising. But in its neediness, its dependence on handouts and cheap grace for survival, its joyous leap toward certain death it had, in the end, made him think of Donna. The two thoughts blended for an instant and he felt suddenly driven to both run for his life, his freedom, and to lay down and die peacefully, accept the chain and get it over with - both, somehow, at once, either action somehow too strenuous to bother with...

He turned away from the bright daylight and moved to the couch. He sat, cupped his face in his hands, and drew a slow breath.

"Jeff, do you believe in Jesus?"

"Oh, shit." Jeff pushed away from the glass doors like a swimmer pushing off at the turn. "No, Danny, I do not. Not as a person, not as a god, not as some mythical hero, *nada*." His words were quick, staccato, angry. His hands were in motion, waving as he spoke, stabbing the air around him. "And in spite of this fact, I've spent the last three nights toasting brain cells to help you talk to this nada. And because of that fact, I'm in danger of losing my woman, who means more to be, by the way, than you do. And in spite of that fact, you want to sit here on my couch and cry to me that somehow your life is unfair because Jesus can't decide if he loves you or hates you for getting your girlfriend pregnant over a year ago. That's a year, Danny. Get over it." Jeff's hands fell to his sides, spent. He turned back to stare out into the street. "Find another gig, man. I'll help if I can. But you've got to clear out of here."

Danny sat in silence, neither arguing nor making any move to leave. He stared down into his hands, counting seconds... After a while, Jeff dropped to the floor and lit a cigarette. He passed it to Danny, then lit another for himself. "What do you want, man?"

"I want to talk to him." Danny took a long drag, swallowed a choke, then let the cigarette dangle from his fingertips to burn slowly out, unused. It reminded him of his life. He focused on the cigarette's hot tip, its slow, backward crawl. *"Them,"* he went on. "I've got two Jesuses hounding my ass. One wants to save me, the other wants me to roast in Hell. You say they're both bullshit. Me, I'm just tired."

"Forget that shit, Danny. Donna was a grownup. She made her own choices."

Danny winced at the name, but continued to stare down into the cigarette's glowing cherry. For a moment it had been a world unto itself, and he'd been inside it, burning but not being consumed.

"I didn't say otherwise." He took another drag, re-stoking the tiny furnace, then coughed loudly. He crushed out the cigarette. "But explain the dreams, then. I was in rehab for eight months, Jeff. Eight months of zero contact with the outside world. Not even TV..."

"I'd see Jesus, too, after that. Imagine no TV..."

"Explain how I knew Donna was dead?"

"Donna's mom told you. You called her from here."

"She confirmed what I already knew. The Accuser - that's the mean Jesus - told me first in the dream, or I never would have called her mom. They both said it was my fault."

"Mom and Jesus. What a pair."

They sat in silence, and Danny found himself reaching for another cigarette. He accepted the pack, fiddled with it a moment, then handed it back without taking one.

"Then there's the Companion," he said.

"The nice Jesus."

"Right. He said Donna still loves me. He said she wants to help me."

Jeff crushed out his cigarette, swiveled back to face the glass doors, pulled one back. From somewhere a cross breeze began to push the cloud of accumulated smoke from the room. Danny felt the breeze at his back as well, pushing him to follow the smoke out, to leave before the doors closed, before his wagging tail vanished forever behind them...

"Face facts, Daniel. Donna's a corpse. She wants nothing for you or me or anybody else. She's a stone, man. It's over for her."

"Don't be an asshole."

"You make me be an asshole. Four months, man. When they let you out, from the goodness of my heart I said, sure, Danny stay a couple days with me. A week maybe. It's been four months, buddy. Take it on the road."

"A few more days, Jeff, please. I need your help. I gotta break through, talk to Jesus."

"So pray. Go to church. Sue's due back in ten minutes, and you can't be here. You're on your own."

* * *

Danny forced open his eyes and focused on the clock; the glowing red numbers read 3:29 AM. It had been 45 minutes since he'd taken the third gram, and still nothing unusual was happening,

no bizarre visuals, no mythical voices or peculiar sounds. He only felt mildly stoned.

What a waste, he thought. Burned again. it reminded him of his life.

A movement in the corner. Something was there, in the darkness. Or rather, something that should have been there was rapidly receding. The ratty carpet, its burn holes and stains no longer holding it down, was rolling up like a scroll, a sardine can bending to an invisible key...

The ocean of blackness where the floor should have been swallowed a chair, and Danny jumped off the couch.

*Shit!* Twenty dollars I paid for this room... Why me?

Beyond standing, he could think of nothing to do about the black pit consuming the room around him and headed his way, so he closed his eyes and stood, arms limp at his sides, counting seconds:

*One...* Somebody owes me, big time...

*Two...* I'm sorry, Donna, I...

*Three...* Please, Jesus, don't kill me...

The carpet hit his ankles and the blackness took him...

"Hello, Danny," came a soft, chorus-like voice. "We've been waiting for you."

*"We?"* Danny opened his eyes. He was standing on a grassy hill, surrounded at a distance by a circle of towering green pines. Their clean scent brushed his nose like an electric current as the Companion appeared beside him, white robes fluttering in the breeze like great, angelic wings. There was no one else in sight.

"We?" Danny said again, but still no one else appeared. He watched a Monarch butterfly on a nearby bush slowly fan its wings in the warm sunlight. He sighed. "Am I dead?" Is it over?"

The Companion laughed. "Not yet, Danny. Patience."

Danny shivered. He couldn't shake the impression that they weren't alone on the hill. Though silent, the Companion's lips still moved, his facial expressions changed, as though, even in that moment, he was responding to a thousand invisible questioners, giving careful answers to each in turn. He seemed to be silently directing the little world around them, maintaining its balance, as

though he were somehow its living center. As if every plant, every creature depended on his nurturing attention, thrived on his patient care.

The Companion was suddenly sitting cross-legged among the tiny flowers that covered the hill like a purple carpet. His hands moved gently over the ground beside him, stroking it as if greeting a familiar animal. The grass quivered at his touch.

Danny shivered again, too. The back of his neck was suddenly warm, as if a friendly hand rested there, comforting him, assuring him that he, too, was a part of this world, that he, too, could believe, could finally escape.

He dropped to the grass beside the Companion. "Okay. What do I do now?"

"Donna wants you to join her. Here."

"Where, exactly, is *here?*"

The Companion smiled broadly. He stood, swiped dust from the seat of his worn denim overalls, patted the tool belt that dangled from his waist. He offered his hand.

"This is my workshop," he said. "There is work to be done. Join us."

*Us...* Danny thought. *We.* He accepted the hand up.

"I'm a good worker," he said as the hill began to shimmer and fade around him. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, Danny," the Companion answered. "Very welcome."

When Danny had gone, the Companion stood alone on the hill. The butterfly that had been sunning itself grew, shifted, and became Donna. She moved to his side.

"Does he understand?"

"Do you?" It was suddenly night, and the Companion drew his wide-brimmed hat down over his one good eye. He pulled his cloak tight around him. "We've played our last sure card. The rest is up to him. If he's going to fall, he'll fall now."

"Will he survive?"

The Companion laughed. "Day follows night, night follows day, to cling to either is death, the deny their unity is never to have lived.

" He frowned, then looked away. He shrugged. "You know the rules as well as I do. He'll make it if he can remember. If he embraces the whole. Anything less..."

The girl shivered. "He'll be back."

"I hope you're right. We've softened things up for him, but he's got to walk through now. He's got to find his own way back. Wish him strength."

For a moment the Companion's robes fluttered again, brilliant white, filling the air around him. Then they were gone. A gnarled, wooden cane appeared from under his long coat; he arched slowly forward, letting the cane take his weight.

"But it's out of our hands," he said, his voice a dry whisper, crackling leaves. "He's on his own now."

A cold wind bent the grass around them. They turned their backs to it and started down the path.

* * *

*A better world... A better world... For I have seen a better world...* It had become a song, a mantra, a rhythm that carried him, smiling and whistling, past the motel front desk, out onto the street, and down the block to blend with the crowd of working drones shuffling bleary-eyed toward one more day in Hell...

Poor bastards! Danny thought. *Wake up!* I know where I'm going, do you? He led a group of pedestrians in crossing against a light. Horns blared. Danny smiled and waved.

*A better world... A better world...*

Jeff answered the door on the third knock. He blinked away the bright sunlight, stared a moment into Danny's face, then moved to push the door closed again.

"Jeff, listen..."

"No."

Danny rushed forward, put a hand in the door. "I broke through, man! I talked to him!"

"Good. See you later."

Danny caught the door with his foot. He pressed his face into the narrow gap.

"That's all right, Jeff. I forgive you, man."

The tension on the door stopped cold. Then the sound of a throat clearing, a deep rumble like distant thunder.

"You forgive me? That's big of you, Danny. Thanks."

The door gave without resistance now, and Danny pushed on into the dimly lit room. He nudged the door closed behind him. "Where's your lights, man?" Silence. "Jeff?"

"You forgot something, old buddy." Jeff appeared from the hallway carrying a cardboard shoe box. He sat on the couch and placed the box on the coffee table before him. "Come see what Sue found, right before she left me forever."

Danny crossed the room and looked down into the little box. A plastic baggy filled with powder. Syringes. A cigarette lighter. A blackened spoon.

"If you're not using it, you're selling it," Jeff was saying. "That's what Sue figured. I showed her my arms - no tracks. She's seen my empty wallet. It must be Danny's, I told her. Only he could be so..."

"It's not mine." Danny looked again into the box, then to Jeff's accusing eyes. He thought of the door, now closed behind him. The back of his neck grew warm.

"Only Danny could be so stupid, I told her. You've been covering for his ass for four months, she says. You're in it with him."

"That shit's not mine, Jeff. You know that." *What's wrong with this picture?* Danny let his eyes drift slowly around the room. The couch, the stereo, the drapes now closed across the glass patio doors. It was all as it had always been. But it was also suddenly different. The walls were not walls, Jeff was not Jeff...

"He's gone, I told her. I threw his ass out. He'll be back, she says..."

The room was a backdrop, a two-dimensional front. Behind it, Danny sensed motion, a rolling blackness sweeping inexorably toward him.

"Like he came back for Donna. Like he shot her up with that shit when all she asked for was a little help, a little love. He killed her, he killed their baby, and he ain't gonna kill me."

The rolling darkness hit him like a fist, and Danny felt his knees buckling, watched the floor rushing up to meet him. The pain was a thunder clap echoing through his body, pushing at his skin from the inside.

"Why'd you do it, Danny? You knew she was pregnant. She needed you, man."

"I didn't know. How could I have known?"

"Don't lie to us, Danny. Stop lying to yourself."

The backs of his hands split and peeled away. It was happening again. "I was messed up."

"You killed her because she loved you and wanted to have your baby. You couldn't stand that, could you? Being tied to her forever, having to give instead of taking, taking, taking. See yourself for what you are, Danny! A nothing! A bug! A miserable crawling insect!"

*"No..."*

Jeff laughed and his laughter ripped a burning seam the length of Danny's body. His chest split wide, peeled back in two dead, curving flakes. Danny pushed through and blinked up as a thousand facets came swirling into his vision - Jeff... Jesus... a dog on a chain... A Monarch butterfly slowly fanning its wings in warm sunlight...

He picked the butterfly and dragged himself frantically toward it. His back legs seemed paralyzed, useless, frozen to the ground. He clutched the grass around him with his front legs and pulled. Purple flowers tore free in his pinchers.

Above him, the butterfly lifted from its perch. Airborne, it began to shift and change. It became Donna.

*Help me, Donna, please...*

Donna turned away, but remained visible at the top of the hill, a silhouette dark as the sky. Danny dug his middle pair of legs into the dirt and managed to roll his wide body forward. He rested, dug

in, moved forward another foot. A sudden wind flattened the grass around him.

*"I accuse you of murder!"* the sky announced. *"I find you guilty! The sentence is death!"*

The black clouds opened and rain pounded the hill with an angry fist. Water rolled and boiled on Danny's back, pushing him deep into the softening ground. Each drop burned him, a hot needle, a name carved into his flesh, spelling darkness, a tiny room, flickering candlelight...

*"Just relax. You won't even feel it."*

*"That's not what I want."*

*"It's what you need. Trust me?"*

*Silence. "I'm pregnant."*

*"I know."*

*"With your baby."*

*"I know."*

*"Ow!"*

*"Just relax. It'll hit you in a minute. You're gonna love this."*

*"I love you, Danny. Don't..."*

*"Trust me."*

Then sirens... paramedics... rain like a hammer, a mouthful of mud... The girl at the top of the hill was facing him now. Danny released his grip on the grass and let the wet earth take him. The hot needles still burned his back, and he willed them to burn hotter, to finish the job.

*Please, Donna, forgive me, I'm sorry, oh Jesus, let me die now, I did it, I did it, I...*

Remember. Irrevocably. The name was now burned forever into his flesh, his soft human flesh. It moved up to his lips and he spoke it to the dirt.

*Guilt. Regret. Sorrow*. Page after page, layer after layer he read the name to the soft ground, spit its fire into the earth, let it flow out of him like lava, confession, like something folded in on itself springing full into black shape, like formlessness naming itself, becoming...

*I am guilt... I am regret... I am sorrow...I am...*

Fire. I am the darkness the fire consumes. I am the killer and the killed. Life and life's taker. Day and night, joined - sad irrevocable oneness...

The air hung suddenly heavy with silence. The rain was gone. Warm sunlight turned the slop around him to dry sand, and Danny pushed himself easily up and out of it - first his round head, then his pink, fleshy arms, his thin, suddenly functional legs. Danny swiped at the dust caked thick on his worn denim overalls, then moved to stand beside Donna at the top of the hill.

"Do you understand?"

Danny nodded. "Day follows night. When you let it." He took her hand and pulled her gently to him. "I won't forget. Thank you."

A warm breeze lifted Danny's glowing robes to flutter a moment around them like great, angelic wings. He pulled his wide-brimmed hat down over his one good eye.

"You're welcome, Danny. Very welcome."

They turned their faces to the wind and started, together, down the path.

# Heritage

Without lights or siren, the ambulance crawled down the rough farm road like a wounded animal - wary, halting, inching its slow way forward over deep, sunbaked ruts, bruising a tree as it rounded the narrow turn; the little house came into sight below. The driver kept his foot firmly on the brake, forcing the machine to creep along at a minimum pace. Acceleration was out of the question. The road had been built for trucks and big-wheeled farm machinery. Every steep incline and rain-worn ditch presented danger to a low-to-the-ground automobile. One moment's hurry could mean a lost muffler, a broken oil pan.

Beside the tiny wooden farmhouse, Peter Beaumont watched the vehicle's timid approach. He looked on in silence, one hand raised against the glare of the afternoon sun. He sighed, turned, and started reluctantly along the path to the porch.

"Mama?" He pushed open the screened door and stepped into the kitchen. The old woman was in motion, carefully maneuvering her wheelchair between the kitchen and the bedroom. She topped the trim threshold and rolled out of sight.

Peter pulled the door closed behind him and followed. He entered the bedroom and stood quietly, facing the back of the old woman's chair. She had a drawer in her lap. Her hands worked through its contents with unhurried precision, lifting out one item after another, turning each tenderly between her ancient fingers, raising it close to her eyes. As she rejected each item in turn, she would refold it, then place it back in the drawer with the same meticulous care.

"Mama," Peter said again, a little louder. "Mama, they're here."

"I know," the old woman said without stopping. "I saw them through the window. Come here, Peter."

Peter crossed to her. He crouched beside her, resting one hand on the arm of her chair. It shifted under his weight.

"Mama, you've got to remember to lock the wheels on this thing. You could fall again..."

"Peter," she said, cutting him short. "Take this." She handed him a bundle of cloth from the drawer. It was a dress, small and neatly folded. "This is the dress I want to be buried in."

"Mama," Peter said, "It's only for a few tests. You won't be there more than a day."

"Just in case something goes wrong." With one hand, she folded his big fingers around the dress. With the other, she touched his face. "Please," she said. "Just in case. So I don't have to worry."

Peter took her hand and pressed it to his lips. "Okay, Mama," he said. "But you don't have to worry. We'll be back by this time tomorrow."

A knock at the kitchen door echoed through the house. Peter laid the dress on the bed, then headed off to answer it. He heard his mother closing the drawer, turning the wheelchair to follow.

Two paramedics stood waiting on the porch. They shifted nervously, knocked again.

"It's open!" Peter said, throwing the door wide. "Come in. We're almost ready."

The old woman was again navigating the threshold between the rooms. Topping the small rise gave her chair a push, and she rolled to a jerking stop at the feet of the ambulance driver - an exceptionally tall man.

"Oh!" she gasped, her breath shallow. "I'm sorry." She quickly backed away and fastened the chair's brake. Her right hand shot reflexively to the worn rosary that hung around her neck.

Peter frowned at the fear he saw in his mother's eyes. Probably the man's uniform, he thought. Pristine white, pure, like the body of an angel. And so tall... He knelt again beside her.

"Don't worry, Mama. It's only for tests. We've got to find out where the pain is coming from if we're going to fix it. And that's what we want, right? To get you all fixed up?"

She clutched his hand tightly, then let it go. "I know, Peter. I'll be fine."

"I'll be right behind you. I'm following in the truck."

"Good," she said. "That's fine, Peter. Don't worry." She calmed herself, breathing deeply. "Don't worry."

The paramedics moved silently onto the porch. They seemed to hover there, waiting. Peter stood and moved behind the wheelchair. He released the brake, and guided his mother out of the farmhouse, down the great, wooden ramp, to the ambulance parked in the grass outside.

The old woman's fingers continued to work furiously at her beads.

* * *

Lying in the ambulance with the silent angel, Claire Beaumont watched her farm crawl slowly past. Her son's pickup hung close behind, bobbing and weaving on the rough ground. Trees swayed in the hot breeze. Their branches reached out to her, touching and scraping against the sides of the ambulance, easing her fears. She felt the pale half-moon, visible in the daylight sky, gently pulling her toward it.

"Thank you, old friend," she whispered, a soft release of breath. "But I'm not ready yet... So much left to do... My family..." She closed her eyes and enjoyed the simple act of breathing without labored effort. "How much longer?" she called to the driver.

"About another hour," the angel beside her answered. "You all live pretty far out. Away from the city, I mean."

"Thank you," she said. She drifted into a light sleep.

* * *

Barbie doll in hand, Kitty Beaumont ran swiftly through the cornfield, expertly avoiding the tiny seedlings that had just begun to push up through the golden soil. She reached the field's edge and switched to a careless skip, rocketing her small body down the grassy hill toward the creek below. When she reached the ancient willow tree, she plopped herself down in a heap, fought to catch her breath.

"Now don't move," she ordered the doll, sternly. "He won't cross over if you don't sit still."

With the slow care of ritual, she positioned the Barbie on the largest exposed root of the tree, then turned to face the water. She pulled her knees up under her chin and became as motionless as her doll, utterly silent.

A faint shimmering appeared on the far shore. Kitty held her breath. A soft plop followed as something landed in the water. A ripple moved across the creek's surface, until a tiny figure crawled up onto the shore at the girl's feet. The creature shook itself furiously, throwing water in all directions.

"Hey!" Kitty cried, wiping the cold drops from her face.

"Sorry," the fairy said. He wrung the water from his hair, then moved to the girl's side. He took a seat beside Barbie on the big, exposed root.

"That's okay," Kitty said, snatching up the doll. "Let's play."

"Not today, Kitty," the fairy said. He stroked thoughtfully at his bearded chin. "Something is happening. Something important." His little body shot upright, and he began to pace across the willow root, mumbling and *harrumphing* to himself.

"What is it?" Kitty asked breathlessly. "Is something wrong?"

The fairy stopped pacing and frowned. "There's someone I want you to meet," he said.

"Someone important? The Fairy Queen?"

"No," the fairy said. "Just a friend. Someone you should get to know."

"I'd rather meet the Fairy Queen." She turned her attention to the Barbie and began to play. "Today, Barbie is the Fairy Queen." She

held the doll by the arms and began to dance it around, tumbling and twirling in a wild ballet.

"Please, Kitty, this is important."

*"This is important,"* Kitty teased, mocking his serious tone. "What's so important about it?"

"She'll tell you that."

*"She?"* The dance stopped. "Your friend is a girl?"

"Yes, a girl," the fairy answered. "A very special friend of mine. I want you to meet her."

Jealousy burned Kitty's cheeks, but turned to curiosity when she saw her companion grow rigid and stare off beyond her, toward the green hill behind them. A brilliant shimmer was moving toward them down the slope, a large patch of silvery nothingness that seemed to hover just over the ground. The grass swayed in its path as if blown by a soft wind.

"She's here," the fairy whispered. "Don't move."

Kitty froze. She held her breath as the shimmering figure approached the old willow. Was it a fairy? Too big. An elf? A goblin? She had never met any of these creatures of the woods, only the fairies. The approaching light disappeared behind the big tree. A sudden crackle made her spin around, as a solid figure stepped out into view.

Kitty frowned. "Why, it's only a little girl. Your friend is just a little girl!"

"Remember what I told you, Kitty," the fairy said, his hands folded imploringly. "This is important. Please don't be rude, as a favor to me."

He leaped off the root and sprinted toward the creek. "I have to go now! Sorry!" He dove headlong into the cold water, leaving the two girls alone.

* * *

"Kitty, get the phone..." John Hastings said, mechanically, groggily. The woman beside him shifted position, but remained asleep. The phone continued to ring.

The man pushed back the covers and reached a long, bare arm across his wife's body. He pulled the receiver to his ear.

"Hello?" He listened quietly for a moment, then said, "Wait, Peter. Hold on. I'll get her." He placed the receiver on the nightstand and switched on the lamp. He gently shook his wife's arm. "Wake up, Kitty. It's your Uncle Peter. He's calling from Missouri."

Kitty Hastings stirred gradually to life, rubbed her eyes. "I was dreaming," she said, her voice small and confused. "A little girl..."

"Honey, the phone."

She kicked free of the covers and took the phone. “Uncle Peter?" Her features pulled slowly tight with worry; she bit her lower lip. "I see," she said finally. "I'll be there by morning." She returned the receiver to its cradle, rolled out of the bed, and began to dress.

"What is it?" John Hastings sat up in the bed, rubbing his face.

"It's Gramma," Kitty answered. "I have to go to Missouri." She opened the closet door and pulled a suitcase from an upper shelf.

"It's really bad?"

"Peter says she hasn't got much time."

Kitty opened the suitcase, then sat beside her husband. She covered her face with her hands, trembling.

"He put her in the hospital," she said angrily. "He took her off the farm... *Bastard!*" She gulped for air and began to weep in great, painful shudders.

"They're sixty miles from a doctor there," John said softly, pulling her close. "She'd die at home."

"She's dying now!" She pushed him away and walked stiffly to the dresser. She began filling the suitcase.

"I'll go with you." He crossed to her, rested his hands on her shoulders.

Kitty turned and embraced him. She held him tightly to her. "No," she said, her voice low. "You stay here. Mind the business."

"The business will wait..."

"Please." She touched his lips to silence him. "I have to go alone."

"Why?"

"I don't know," she answered softly. "Something's happening. Something important."

She pressed her ear tightly to his chest, holding him, letting herself be held.

"I'm frightened," she said.

* * *

In the stark, antiseptic hospital room, Claire Beaumont slept on and on.

"She's fallen into a coma," the doctor said.

Peter Beaumont pressed his lips together. He was tired. His whole body hung loosely, his strength exhausted by the night's vigil.

"How long?' he asked.

"We'll know more in a few days."

Peter lowered himself into the hard bedside chair, touched his mother's arm. His breath whistled faintly through pursed, dry lips. "I understand. Thank you." He stood and moved toward the door.

"Will you be available, Mr. Beaumont?"

"I'll be here as long as necessary," Peter said. He stepped out into the hallway, and the doctor followed. "But I've got to get a hotel room. I've got to sleep. I'll call with a number once I'm settled in."

"Good." The doctor was already in motion, disappearing down the gray-carpeted hallway. "Get some rest, Mr. Beaumont. We'll notify you if her conditions changes."

"Thanks," Peter said. He stepped into the lounge.

Kitty Hastings stared sightlessly at a magazine draped across her lap, her body rigid with tension. When Peter entered the lounge, she tossed the magazine aside and marched angrily toward him.

"Hi, Kitty," Peter said.

*"You son of a bitch!"* Kitty spat the words like cold venom. She turned away, arms folded across her chest.

The reproach rang in Peter's ears. Indignation rose like water in his chest, but a dam of weariness pushed it right back down; it wasn't worth it.

"Get off it, Kitty," he said, brushing past her. He moved to the row of pay phones behind her and opened the directory.

"She wants to die at home," Kitty said, softening. “The whole family knows that."

"I didn't bring her here to die." He found the heading for hotels and ran his finger slowly down the list of numbers. "She came for tests. That's all. It just worked out this way."

"What about what she wants?" Kitty demanded. "She planned this out years ago."

"What?" He turned to face her, eyes narrowed. "What does that mean, *she planned this out?”*

For a moment, Kitty felt as if she were falling into a hole. She didn't know what she meant. A vague, dream-like memory touched her, then quickly vanished. She hesitated.

"I mean she told the whole family she wanted to die at home, that's all."

Peter cleared his throat and turned back to the phone book.

"Where was the family when she was in pain?" he said, his voice shaking. "I'll tell you where. They were at home in their beds, secure in the knowledge that old Uncle Peter was there at Mama's side, taking care of everything. And now you want to complain. Jesus."

He lifted the receiver and began rooting through his pockets for change. Kitty moved to his side and placed a hand on his shoulder. She laid a quarter on the open phone book.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Peter," she said softly. "I'm just confused."

She returned to her chair, and fixed her eyes on a point in the empty air, struggling to retrieve the strange feeling that had almost engulfed her - the image of a little girl, a shimmer, so much like a dream, yet somehow so real...

Peter Beaumont appeared suddenly before her. He had finished his call and was speaking to her:

"I have a room. Just a few minutes away. We could share it, save money."

Kitty grabbed his words like a rope and pulled herself back into focus. "No thanks, Peter," she said. “Maybe. I want to stay here a while. I want to see her."

"Call me," he said, already turning to leave. "I'll call the nurse's station from the hotel, once I know the room number. You can get it

from them." He paused in the doorway, considering her. "You okay, Kitty?"

"It was a long drive," she said. "I'll be fine."

A peaceful mist was settling over her, pulling her toward sleep. As Peter Beaumont passed through the swinging lounge doors and disappeared down the hallway, she sank deep into her chair, accepting the calming silver rain around her, sur-rendering to it. In moments, she was asleep.

* * *

"My name is Claire," the little girl said.

Kitty laughed.

"Is that funny?"

Kitty began to dance the doll again; this time it was a frenzied, angry jig. "Yes," she said, giggling. "My Gramma's name is Claire. I think that's funny. It's not a little girl's name at all."

"And I suppose your Gramma was never a little girl?"

"Of course she was," Kitty said sharply. "Don't be stupid. But that was a thousand years ago, back when names didn't count for anything."

"I see," Claire said. She sat on the ground across from the other girl. "Do you have a name?" she asked.

"My name's Kitty."

Claire laughed. She rolled on the ground and kicked her feet in the air.

Fire painted Kitty's cheeks. She stood and turned away, arms folded across her chest. "You're only laughing at me because I laughed at you."

"No!" Claire said, suddenly also standing. "I used to have a cat named Kitty. That's not a little girl's name either."

Kitty giggled in spite of herself. She sat down again, arms wrapped tight around her knees. She smiled. “My real name is Katherine," she said.

They laughed together.

* * *

"Excuse me, Ma'am."

A white-clad orderly was gently shaking Kitty Hastings' arm. She opened her eyes.

"Visiting hours are over, Ma'am. You'll have to leave now."

"What? But it's only..." She looked at her watch; it was eight o'clock in the evening. "Oh, Jesus," she said. "I've been sleeping for hours."

The orderly nodded. He smiled and backed away.

"Come back tomorrow," he said. "Visiting hours start again at eight in the morning.“ He disappeared from the lounge.

Damn it, Kitty thought. What's happening to me? Her whole body was stiff. Her neck throbbed dully as she turned it slowly left, and then right, loosening it.

And what are these dreams? What do they mean? Like forgotten childhood memories, dredged up by Gramma's illness... an event, a meeting. With each recurrence, the images became clearer, stayed with her longer.

The setting was the Beaumont farm. She'd played by the creek a thousand times as a child. But the fantastic elements of the fairy and the strange little girl... She was certain these had never happened. Yet they seemed so familiar, so real.

She walked to the nurse's station and asked for Peter's number at the hotel. She accepted the slip of paper, thanked the nurse, and started for the exit.

* * *

Peter Beaumont heard one sharp knock on his hotel room door and rose to answer it. "Hi, Kitty," he said. He swung the door wide, stepped back. "I figured you'd take me up on the room, so I got a double." He waved his hands, pointing to the two big beds.

"Thanks, Uncle Peter."

She stepped into the room and threw her suitcase on the uncluttered bed. Peter's bed was a shambles; apparently he had slept the day away as well.

"How's Mamma?" Peter asked.

"No change." She chose not to mention her own coma-like sleep. "The hospital will call if anything happens."

She examined the large room around her. It was well-kept, but somehow plain. The air was damp. She noted a water stain on one of the curtains. She frowned.

"How's the food in this place?"

"Expensive," Peter answered. "I ate at McDonald's."

Kitty shook her head and reached for the phone.

When she had finished eating, Peter was already in bed. He sat reading a magazine and seemed impatient to turn out the lights. Apparently, his full day of sleep was not a topic for conversation, either.

* * *

The girls played together for hours. They played Pilgrims-and-Indians, Pocahontas, Davy Crocket - whatever Kitty wanted to play, Claire joined in with gusto. They ran laughing through the fields and soon found themselves back at the giant willow beside the creek.

Kitty dropped to the ground, exhausted. She leaned against the great tree, head resting back into clasped hands, elbows splayed. Minnows darted through the water before her, fighting against the current, sparkling in the late afternoon sun.

Claire appeared at her side. "My goodness, this has been fun!"

Kitty watched the fish as her companion sat down on the grass beside her, cross-legged, laughing.

"The fairy said something was happening," Kitty said. "Something important. You're supposed to tell me about it." She picked up a pebble and launched it into the creek. The minnows scattered, then turned and shot downstream, blue and silver lightning, the fast current rushing them off toward the distant river.

Claire's laughter stopped. She stood.

That's right," she said. "I'd almost forgotten." She looked anxiously to the hills around her, to the cornfield above, to the already setting sun. "Can't we play just a little longer?

"No," Kitty said firmly. "It's almost nighttime. I'll have to go home soon. My Gramma's waiting."

Kitty's words washed over the strange little girl, trans-forming her. An aura of great age, of weariness, settled over her like a cloud, radiated like mist from behind her child-eyes.

"Kitty? Do you know who I am?"

Kitty remained silent. She dug in the dirt with a stick. She sensed that to answer truthfully would spoil the magic; the spell would be broken and the game would end. Yet even now it was getting dark. Any minute, she'd be called back to the house. She'd have to leave then anyway, immediately, game or no game.

"Yes," she answered, finally. "I know who you are."

* * *

The telephone rang and Kitty woke with a start. Sunlight filtered through the shabby curtains. She closed her eyes.

Peter appeared from the bathroom, razor in hand, his face half covered in lather. He crossed the room in four great strides and snatched up the phone.

"Hello? This is Peter Beaumont... *Great!*"

"What is it, Peter," Kitty asked from the bed.

He raised a finger to his lips. "Yes, she's here with me. We're on our way."

He hung up the phone.

"Peter?"

"Mama's awake," he said. "She's asking for you."

* * *

"Kitty!" Claire Beaumont cried as her granddaughter appeared in the doorway.

"Hi, Gramma." Kitty crossed to the far side of the bed and took a seat on the radiator. She held the old woman's hand. "It's good to have you back," she said. "Are they treating you right?"

"Just fine," the old woman said softly. "Very fine."

Peter moved to the bed and touched his mother's free hand. "Hi, Mama," he said. "Can I get you anything?"

Peter!" She gripped his wide fingers. "You see how good God is? Our family is together!"

Peter and Kitty exchanged smiles. They sat in silence.

"Peter?" the old woman said, her voice suddenly powerful, commanding.

"Yes, Mama?"

"Fetch the doctor. I want to know when I can go home."

"You're still weak, Mama," Peter started.

She fixed a kind gaze on his face. The vehemence fell away from her voice:

"Please." She squeezed his fingers, a gentle reassurance. "I just want to hear it from the doctor. Maybe I'm not so weak anymore."

"Mama…"

"Please."

When Peter had left the room, the old woman turned urgently to her granddaughter.

"Kitty," she said, her voice again vibrant and commanding, "you've got to go to the farm."

"The farm will wait," Kitty said, cooing as if speaking to a child. "I'm staying right here with you. Why..."

She stopped herself, looked away. Her own words burned in her mouth. She had spoken as if she were facing a helpless, frightened old woman, someone incapable of knowing her own mind. But the eyes before her were sharp and clear. The hand she held was strong, filled with power.

"Gramma, I'm sorry," she started. “I just..."

The old woman frowned. “Stop wasting time," she said flatly. "Go to the farm. Today. Before nightfall." She gripped Kitty's hand tightly, then pushed it away.

"But Gramma..."

The mist was descending again around Claire Beaumont. Her eyes closed.

"Hurry!" the old woman whispered. "Go!"

"Why?," Kitty begged. "What do you want me to do there?"

"She'll tell you that." The voice was a whisper, barely audible.

*"She?"*

Kitty's spine stiffened as an electrical charge ran up from the radiator to the base of her neck. She felt a cold gust of wind and spun toward the window. It was closed.

The old woman was almost gone. She was mumbling soundlessly, repeating a phrase with each shallow breath. Kitty pressed her ear close to her grandmother's face, and strained to make out the words.

*"Unless Ye become like these little ones,"* Claire Beaumont was saying, *"Ye cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven."*

* * *

Kitty spent the afternoon roaming through the tiny farmhouse. She sat in one room and then another. She felt her grandmother's presence in everything she touched - the handmade quilt, the ancient, faded crucifix on the kitchen wall, the big iron stove, once wood-burning, now converted to gas.

She fried an egg and made a sandwich. She ate alone at the big table, silent, wishing for the company of family; she felt the house yearning for motion, voices.

When twilight came, she locked the door behind her, and started slowly through the field toward the hill, toward the little creek at its base.

What am I doing here? Why aren't I in the city with my grandmother? Or at home with my husband? What am I here to find? To do? It's like the dreams...

The evening air fell silent as she approached the creek. No chatter of life poured from the nearby woods. The water trickled by soundlessly, its current almost stopped.

She felt the silence now inside her, too - a delicate presence, a soft bud of certainty unfolding within, casting slow ripples of calm. She sat on the ground beneath the great willow tree and waited, resolute, motionless.

A shimmer appeared on the hill to her left. A silvery cloud of nothingness was approaching her. Kitty sighed.

"Come on out," she said. “I see you."

The shimmering cloud circled behind the willow tree. The little girl from her dreams appeared to her right.

"Hi, Kitty," the girl said.

"Hello." She wanted to say more, but the little girl jumped frantically in front of her. She gestured urgently toward the horizon.

Kitty looked west: the sun was just disappearing behind the hill.

"We're almost out of time," the girl said. "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes," Kitty answered. “You’re Gramma."

"Wrong!" the little girl shouted. She rolled on the ground, laughing. “You are!"

"What? You must be Gramma. Your name is Claire."

The girl stopped laughing and sat up, cross-legged on the grass. "That was a thousand years ago," she said. "Before names counted for anything. Now my name's Kitty."

Their eyes met across the grass, held. Then the girl was again gesturing, shaking her finger toward the swiftly darkening horizon.

*”Who am I?”* she demanded.

Kitty studied the strange little girl before her. But she was not strange at all; she was familiar. The large eyes that crinkled at the corners when she laughed. The dark hair that framed her round face. Those high Beaumont cheekbones - a miniature reflection of Kitty's own. Of Gramma's. Of Peter's. A distinctive face that might shine out from any Beaumont family picture, in any generation past. A family resemblance.

But not Gramma.

*Unless ye become like these little ones,* her grandmother had said. Scripture. The Kingdom of Heaven... Kitty closed her eyes and searched the silence within for an answer:

She saw herself as a child, playing at the foot of her grandmother's chair, listening to the stories Gramma read from the big family Bible propped open in her lap. She watched her own small hands moving dolls around the clean, wooden floor, acting the stories out, a child's interpretation of Divine history.

Her heart jumped into her throat as she heard her mother, young and alive, moving through the kitchen, humming a tune as she washed dishes, the soft clink as each clean plate was stacked to dry. Through the doorway she could see her father and Uncle Peter huddled together at the big kitchen table, coffee cups steaming in their hands, trading farm talk in hushed voices. Laughing. Making plans for the summer crop.

She was a child again, wrapped in the warm security of family, blanketed by the sounds and smells and gentle rhythms of family life. But she was also an adult, viewing the scene, trembling invisibly at the blanket's warm touch - shaking with new understanding as the sounds and smells and rhythms around her turned golden with meaning, became gradually concrete:

Each slow movement of her mother's hand, each soft word from the table, each loving glance cast a line, a glowing thread in the blanket, in the weave of history that had brought them all to this place, in this time, in just this way. Threads of golden light filled the house, intersecting, weaving patterns, moving from and to each of them, passing through them, binding them together into one incorruptible unit.

The walls around her vanished, and she saw the lines extending out to the horizon, lines everywhere, lines of many colors, many families, interweaving in the night air, enlarging the pattern. The life of all families. Lines of love, anger, joy, suffering, care, birth, death - endless colors and intensities blending into one vast human tapestry that covered all the Earth, that filled the open sky...

And, somehow, held them together. A single thread in the blanket that warmed the Earth, that cradled it to the bosom of a larger family. She was rising now into the night sky, where each glowing star traced a line of its own, threads in a greater tapestry, vast beyond comprehension…

Yet, somehow, the same. Lines cast by a gentle motion, a soft word, a loving glance. Moving lines made up of smaller lines. A tapestry woven from infinite layers of the same repeating pattern - each layer supported by, and dependent upon, those above it, below it, around it. Infinite layers of familial love, the smallest line as important as the largest, all lines together painting one vast family portrait - the gentle daily rhythms of a family as big...

As big as heaven. As big as God.

And beside her still, her grandmother's voice - the ancient stories that were somehow the blueprint for it all. The pattern to which the grand tapestry aspired. The measure by which each line would be judged.

She hovered over the farm now, watching silently as the weave of lines there thinned, fading in brilliance. The pattern was breaking up as its center ebbed closer and closer to darkness. Her father's line stretched far past the horizon, to Korea, where it had been abruptly cut off. Her mother's line twisted in slow spirals, fading into cancer, finally breaking off at the tiny cemetery at the edge of town. Only Uncle Peter's line glowed with any vigor; but it, too, was slowly fading, burdened into shadow by worry for the darkening center, dangerously taught, stretched thin in its attempt to maintain the pattern alone.

Yet the tapestry, spread forward in time, was intact. Only this moment flickered weakly, a rend in the fabric already being repaired. A soft glow was rising up through the fading human lines, a silvery shimmer ebbing up from the soft ground, holding the tattered fabric together, pulling a new thread from the distance and stitching it carefully into place. A new center was being forged; new lines spread to fill the gaps - new voices, new laughter, new love...

She had cast her own line far away, to another State; now she was being called home. She watched her line doubling back, growing in brilliance, returning to the place of her birth. To the piece of earth her family had supported and depended upon for more than a hundred years. To the piece of earth that had supported and depended on them. To a covenant established long before her birth, that would extend beyond her death - that

incorporated her personal birth and death into a larger plan, into a Life without beginning or end...

Patterns within patterns. Cycles of love. The new pattern emerging below her was not identical to any that had come before it, nor to any that would follow. But it was familiar. A pattern that might shine out from any Beaumont generation, future or past. A family resemblance. One sure stitch in the Universal Tapestry, one link in a chain that could never be broken - one family wedded to a farm. That farm to the Earth. The Earth to the sky. The sky... to a world without end.

Mysterious ways. Promises kept. A portrait drawn by a trustworthy hand. A tapestry in which no thread was unimportant, and no line was ever alone. Where each thread depended upon, and was responsible for, every other. Where love could be counted on.

God's family. One vast, incorruptible union. A Universal Body, in which the nearest hand would always reach out to lend aid, where no member would fall away unnoticed. Where all hands were, in the end, one hand.

A hand casting infinite lines...

Kitty opened her eyes. The sun was gone. A gentle breeze caressed her face, moving to dry the tear now resting on her cheek.

"Quickly, Kitty," her companion whispered. "Who am I?"

"You are the land," Kitty answered. "The nearest hand."

Invisible in the now complete darkness, the little girl smiled.

"Welcome home, Kitty."

* * *

Kitty Hastings sat alone in the darkness. But she was not alone. The singing wind and the fast-flowing water, the grass and the great willow tree, they were there with her; they were her friends.

She stood and began to walk slowly back towards the little wooden farmhouse. A large, pale moon lit her way.

"Thank you, old friend," she said.

As she entered the house, the telephone was ringing.

"Hello?"

"This is Peter." Silence. "Mama's dead. She just faded away."

"Oh, no... Should I come out?"

"Stay put," Peter answered. "They're bringing her there. I'll call Father Benson in the morning. We'll arrange for the funeral in town."

"Okay," Kitty said.

"Kitty?"

"Yes?"

"There's a lot to be done now." His voice cracked as he spoke. "I'd really appreciate if you could stay around a while."

"Of course, Peter." She breathed a silent sigh of relief.

She hung up the phone and sat quietly, absorbing the smells and memories of the old house. She reached deep to feel sadness, grief at the passing of her beloved grandmother, but no tears would come. Instead, a pervasive peace welled within her. The silence had become a living current. It moved through her, poured from her, flowed to her from every direction. A tree outside the window rustled softly in the night wind; her hands trembled, responded.

She made coffee and sat at the big table, sipping carefully at the steaming cup. She looked again around her, at the evidence of her grandmother's good life in this world. Her eyes settled on a page from an old church calendar her grandmother had framed and hung near the door - the finely drawn lines of Mary and Joseph, kneeling before a shimmering manger, casting loving glances toward the child within. Wrapped in a blanket. Surrounded by animals. A star responding overhead.

*The Holy Family*. Kitty smiled.

Nothing ever passes away, she thought. It only passes on.

# Or Memories Draped by the Tyrannical Spider

The real struggle in life is the battle against memory. What really kills you, in the end, is not the bullet lodged in your brain, the cancer cell that swims through you, salmon-like, to its spawning pool in some vital organ, or the safe that falls on your head from a fourteenth-story window. What really kills you is the excruciating effort, day by day, of dragging round the dead weight of your memories.

Every day you live another twenty four hours. Every hour - each minute in that hour, every second - you're experiencing something new; you fall in love, get bitten by a stray dog, convert to some bizarre religious cult, break a nail, make or lose a friend, all the big and little things that make up a life. And every second of that life, whether you're paying attention or not, gets stored up in this carryall sack called memory.

The sack grows. Over the years, it gets heavy as - day by day, experience by experience - your life rushes through you and vanishes behind. You start to stoop under the effort of facing the future while dragging along the accumulated baggage of your past.

Then one day, you find the damned thing too heavy to carry at all anymore. You tug and stress and pull. It won't budge.

You make a mistake.

You question: *Why do I carry this terrible weight? Why am I afraid even to look behind me?*

You reason: *These are MY memories, MY life. I have nothing to fear*.

You say: *"I'll just open this heavy bag and take a few items out. I'll confront my past, lighten my load, and get on with business as usual."*

You find a method: It might be the analyst's couch. A clergyman's office. The understanding company of a friend. Solitary introspection.

Then, finally, you open the sack. Out comes a bullet, or a cancer cell, or a safe. Better you had just fallen down dead, cause unknown.

Memory is the enemy, my friend, and sooner or later, it gets you.

If you ask me, I say the darned thing is alive and - I'm convinced of this - *evil*. The thing is consciously and intentionally out to get us.

Now, don't turn away thinking I'm crazy. I have good reason for believing this. My theory is based wholly on experience.

For instance, I have an uncanny memory for telephone numbers. They seem to stick to my brain. I hear a number once and it never goes away. It just keeps prattling around in my head, bouncing off walls and echoing back... *227-3609... 227-3609... 227...* You get the idea.

The problem is that I can never seem to connect these numbers in my head with their owner's faces. They just persist as things unto themselves, useless for their lack of personal association. I don't know who the hell I'd find on the other end if I called; so, usually, I don't.

But sometimes these numbers obsess me:

I'm walking home from the market. I'm carrying a bag of groceries. The mind of a normal, healthy person would be on things like tomatoes or eggs or the price of chicken parts or beer - normal things.

But not me. No, I'm walking along with some seven digit number stuck in my head. It repeats like a mantra: *da-da-da-da da-da-da,* over and over again, endlessly. I'm pounding it out on the pavement under my shoes as I walk all glassy-eyed, like some delivery boy wannabe dreaming of Gene Kelley stardom.

I fight the temptation to stop at a pay phone and try out the number. When I get home, I distract myself: I cook dinner. I watch TV. I walk my dog, Rex.

And then, eventually, I call. I mean, what real choice do I have? If you'd ever seen a phone number superimposed on your television screen, or heard your own dog (who claims to love you) chanting a

numeric Hare Krishna while defiling your neighbor's carport, you'd know what I mean. You'd do it too.

So anyway, I make the call. Somebody answers.

*"Hello?"*

I recognize the voice. Down goes the phone.

The two worst years of my life come tumbling back in all their 3-D Technicolor horror. I writhe under the onslaught of remembered pain, screaming and crying and indiscriminately destroying things.

That woman… the things I did to please her… the humiliation... Holy Jesus. How could I have forgotten that?

Ah, but that's my secret; that's where all this is leading. It's my special thing, my secret advantage over the rest of poor, struggling Humanity. You see, I have learned to forget. I have experienced the true nature of memory, and have erected walls in my mind against its malevolent presence. I say with conviction that memory is the killer because it tried to kill me.

One day, years ago, my sack got too heavy. The strain was too much; I just couldn't go on. The constant weight of every failure, every broken promise, every bad relationship, every foolish decision had me backed into a comer. I couldn't move. I stood at the crossroads, tugging and pulling, wearing myself out. I had to do something, but what?

Like an idiot, I opened the sack. I shoved in my hand, and pulled it out clutching a nice, shiny handgun: fully loaded, too.

You can barely see the scars today.

Anyway, that should have killed me, but it didn't. Somebody heard the shot and I was rushed to a hospital. Thanks to their machines, my body lived on, quite separate from my fractured consciousness. I found my way from a state of death to a state of indefinitely prolonged near-death: *Coma.* I stayed there for seven years.

But where was I, my conscious self, for those seven long years? I was inside the sack. Of course, I didn't realize that at first. It took me a good long time to figure that one out.

The first couple of years I just diddled away on sexual fantasy stuff. You know: first date, first real touch, loss of virginity - the fun side of the whole puberty trip.

Oh, Jeez, you can't imagine what it's like to do it for the very first time, over and over again. A moment of your life when you were really aware, totally alert, noticing everything. And then, suddenly, you find you've got the power to repeat the whole sequence, *ad infinitum*, from beginning to end, every detail intact. Every feeling. Every sensation. Always fresh. Always new.

I mention this one thing in such detail because it was through this that I figured out where I was. And, of course, what was really happening - both to me singularly, and to the human race as a whole.

I've always had a compulsive, addictive personality type. In my life I've been addicted to tobacco, alcohol, cocaine, women… you name it. It's not the things themselves; it's the rush, the sensation.

Anyway, once I discovered that I had this power to endlessly repeat experiences from my past, I got hooked. You can guess which one got me. It must have been the best fifteen minutes of my life. I never got tired of it. I relived it thousands of times; maybe millions. Time is different in the sack, and I mean that both ways.

And I wasn't at all thrown by the strangeness of the situation. I mean, I remembered shooting myself. I figured I was dead; and somehow - though they tell you in church it can't happen for suicides - I'd gotten into Heaven. I was satisfied, happy even, that things had turned out so well. I was quite ready to spend a blissful eternity on that bed.

But then something truly diabolical happened: There I am, sublimely plooking Mary Ann Trent, when into the room walks my mother.

Now, I can tell you for sure that this part never happened in real life. If it had, I would never have lived to kill myself later. This was not coming from my personal stockpile of memory; this part was new.

The first time this bizarre twist occurred, she just walked through the room and out again. She didn't so much as notice me squirming on the bed with my jeans bunched up around my ankles.

Eventually, I got used to her coming and going. I stopped grabbing for my pants every time. But once I got comfortable with the situation, it changed again.

The first time she noticed was really bad. She stopped at the foot of the bed and turned absolutely purple. . .

I didn't stop. I expected her to just leave. I even smiled at her once and pointed to the door.

She stayed.

It's a strange feeling to become aware that someone has become aware of you. It creeps over you in stages and you begin to see yourself, your actions, through the observer's eyes. You begin to judge yourself by the other's standards. Liberation becomes shame. Shame becomes anger.

I stopped. There was a big fight. Mom screamed and I screamed. Mary Ann cried and went home. I got grounded for ten years.

With Mom in the picture, I lost the ability to repeat any-thing; I was under her power. A regular daily routine set in, with mornings and evenings and school and all that brand of useless, uninteresting crap.

I no longer believed that I was in Heaven. It was beginning to look more like Hell. I figured maybe they let you taste the good stuff before they sent you down, so you'd suffer more.

And boy, did I suffer.

I lived through endless boring days of school and home-work and TV and homework and school. . . It was a lot like my real teenage life, but with certain decisive, hellish alterations.

From the start, everything went wrong. Every triumph of my young life became a defeat. No matter how hard I studied, my grades stunk. My old friends now hated me. Every girl I asked out said no, except one.

Mary Ann Trent swallowed her pride and accepted my invitation to the senior prom. She promptly disappeared. They say she was institutionalized; severe schizophrenia that no one had

noticed until she consented to go out with me. That had been the kicker; it proved she wasn't rational.

They told me this to my face.

I got rejected by the soccer team and the debate team. The latter occurred because, in the midst of tryouts, I developed a bizarre speech impediment: my tongue swelled up like a prickly, pink water-balloon. I just stared across at my opponent with tears streaming down my cheeks, barely able to breathe, let alone argue my point. I stumbled back to my seat, choking and wheezing. Everybody had a good laugh.

My tongue stayed fat. I couldn't eat. I lost weight.

I collapsed into a hopeless depression. The thought of going on like this for all eternity was just too much. I decided to kill myself, again.

No sooner had the thought entered my mind, when I felt the weight of a gun in my hand. But this time, instead of looking at the gun, I looked up to see where it came from.

That's when I saw *The THING*. It was. . . well, there's really no way to describe it. There's nothing on this side of the sack to compare it to.

You sometimes hear stories about people tripping acid and the sun shoots out this long sticky tongue like a frog's to suck the life out of you. That's not how it looked, but that's exactly how it felt. It felt like those stories, all hot and wet and full of death you can't run away from. You're just stuck there, watching it come at you, sensing deep down just how small and helpless you really are.

But I was lucky. *The THING* didn't want to kill me; it wanted me to kill myself. It wanted my despair.

Whatever it was, I think I really pissed it off when I looked up. I get the feeling no one's ever done that before because, instead of just squashing me flat - it could have; it was that close - it let out this long, high-pitched squeal, like I'd surprised it, then scuttled off into the sky. It moved over those clouds just like a spider backs-up over a web. It hit the horizon and vanished.

Two seconds later, I was awake. The shock of seeing the thing snapped me out of the coma.

The hospital shrink commented that people in comas often report strange dreams.

The man is an idiot. I admit that the life I led may have been a dream; but the thing I saw was real. I could not, in a million years of random dreaming, create something like that, or envision what I saw it doing.

I was on my own to figure the whole thing out. I went to the library and got books on memory, sleep research, brain chemistry, biology, philosophy, religion, shamanism, the occult. . . I had no intention of sleeping until I'd found some answers; I studied around the clock for days. I closed the last book, put the last piece to the puzzle, just as the last Dexedrine dropped from the bottle I'd acquired to ensure my success.

My new understanding was far from pleasant, and difficult to accept. But because of it I am now safe, or mostly safe anyway. And because what I found concerns all Mankind, I now offer this understanding, and this safety, to you. I urge you to accept it.

Memory is not natural to the human psyche. It's a growth, an implanted organ. It does not serve the benevolent function we assign to it; the only way it serves us is on a silver platter.

Philosophers have argued for centuries about the nature and origin of evil. Where does it come from? Why is there suffering in the world?

There isn't, or at least there wasn't once. Suffering, despair, evil, death, these are all imports into our world and our lives.

Pain sneaks up from behind us. It triggers memory into action and, thereafter, the memory of pain defines our lives. Everything we experience passes through this organ. On the other side it gets twisted around, changed. Something essentially human gets removed, and what's left trickles back to us like raw, stagnant sewage.

We store it in our sack. We call it our lives.

*We do not remember our lives.*

We are thinking, feeling, moving in this world, but only in this present moment. We believe we've stored away a true record of our lives, a true kernel of who we really are, who we've been, but our

remembered experiences are empty. They lie behind us like corpses, husks, drained of all real vitality. The energy we'd thought stored up in past experience is gone; it has been used. Our lives are stolen from us.

The organ of this theft is memory itself. I say this organ is unnatural, that it was implanted in our species a long, long time ago - so long ago, in fact, that it has become a part of our genetic makeup. Like the mitochondria in human cells, it's an inborn energy regulator that was once a parasite, an independent entity. It is now born dormant in every human being, waiting to be switched on early in childhood.

One moment's surprise: we let down our guard. The organ begins to function and our energy is sapped. A strange substance fills us. It's a waste product, utterly devoid of life. When it enters, we experience it as Fear, Loss, Regret, Despair. It poisons us, ages us. When it fills us completely, we die. The sack becomes too heavy and we fall under the strain.

This may well explain the Church's doctrine of original sin: we are born with the capacity to allow death and suffering into our pristine world. It all enters through us, through memory.

But this is the part they leave out of their doctrine that must be understood: *we are victims*. Theoretically, we have a choice; we could resist. We could, in theory, reject the curse of memory and move about in this present moment only, never looking back or caring where we've been. But in reality our environment administers that first shock long before we've become aware of ourselves, or of the possibility of choice.

The first thing a doctor does once he's pulled a baby from a womb is slap its behind: Pain...and then the memory of pain… and for the rest of the baby's life, the memory of everything else. The keg gets tapped in the first minutes of post-natal life. Worse, the baby never knows what's happened. He learns to cherish his memory, to identify it as his true self. He's hooked; he'll never think to shut it off.

But it's easy once you've realized the need. You simply learn to forget. You learn to keep your eyes on the road and never look

behind you. You turn your back cold on who you were yesterday, and start out as a blank slate each morning. The philosophers call it Tabula Rasa. I call it freedom. And safety.

Of course, the thing on the other side is not passive. It hunts us like prey. It dogs me, sets traps for me, like with the tele-phone numbers. I must be guarded every minute against repeating that one moment's surprise.

I had good reason to cancel service, to cut off the memory flow. I saw what was on the receiving end of that transaction. I looked into its face. That shock trickled back to me as fear, a fear I've honed into understanding and safety.

If you're not convinced by my story, friend, then I suggest you take a look for yourself.

The next time you feel pain, regret, despair, or when you feel the terrible weight of your remembered defeats and mistakes filling you with doubt, shattering your confidence: in that moment, look up, look behind you.

Something is feeding.

# Be a Kathy Girl!

My hands were shaking with fatigue and relief as - *at last!* - I turned the key in the lock to my own door.

*Home.*

I didn't even bother to change clothes. I tossed my jacket on the sofa and loosened my tie. Then, after mixing a whiskey sour - more whiskey than sour - I plopped down in my favorite chair and turned on the tube.

I was exhausted. I'd worked sixty hours in three days, napping when I could on the small couch in the reception area outside my office. Finally free to get away for a night, I'd found my way out blocked by a ten mile traffic jam - thousands of customers flocking like lemmings to our Downtown showroom, crawling over each other, squabbling like caged rats for their chance to catch a glimpse of Kathy and, consequently, to lap up our new line of spring fashions.

I'd forgotten the big unveiling was tonight. I'd left designing the spring line to my partner, Joe, while I concentrated on negotiating the Red China deal.

"Leave it to me, Old Buddy," he'd said. "I've got an idea that'll corner a whole market we've been missing! We'll rule the world!"

I was glad Joe wanted it. It left me free to open up another market we'd been missing: China –a billion hungry consumers with a billion pockets ripe for the picking.

So I left the spring line to him, and locked myself in the negotiating room. I didn't even check Joe's sketches; with Kathy as our spokeswoman, we could offer them gunnysacks and nosebones...

I heard the lock turning, again, behind me. I swiveled toward the door just as it swung in and a stranger entered the apartment.

On second glance, it wasn't a stranger. It was my wife, Jilly.

She was different. Her hair was red, cut into that short, curls-right-up-next-to-her-head style that was so popular in the '90s. She had a little quasi-duck-tail thing shaved into the back of her neck. I hated it.

"Wow, you look great," I lied. "I hardly recognized you."

I expected her to cross the room and give me a little kiss, but she moved instead to the kitchen. I heard the refrigerator door open, jars clanking around.

"You all right?" I called after her. I got up and followed the kitchen sounds. I stopped in the open doorframe, leaning against the woodwork, hands in pockets.

"Hey," I said softly. "What's the story?"

Jilly straightened and slowly closed the refrigerator door. She leaned back against the counter, back rigid, arms crossed.

I stared in amazement. More than her hair had changed. It was still Jilly, but it was also somebody else. She'd altered her appearance in a thousand subtle, yet collectively alarming ways. Her eyes seemed smaller, almond shaped. The irises were now green. Her face and arms were lightly freckled, perhaps to go with the red hair. Her lips were thinner. Her breasts were smaller and her hips had been shaved: she suddenly had a stick figure, boy's body.

"You're never home anymore," she said, her voice cold, rehearsed. "You're always up there…" she gestured toward the living room, meaning, I guessed, Downtown, my office, "… fondling Miss Perfect..."

I hated this particular argument. It was lose-lose for me because all my rational explanations - that being CEO of a multinational corporation requires the kind of hours I work, if not more; that our high class lifestyle, which she thrives on but I hardly have time to notice, requires the kind of money I make from all those hours away from home; that "Miss Perfect," meaning Kathy, is not only not "perfect," she isn't even real - are, for Jilly, just lies, lame attempts to cover my "affair" with the woman every man wants and every woman wants to be.

I don't blame her. She's met Kathy. It's hard not to believe in her, even when you know the facts. It's hard not to fall in love with her; I'm probably the only man there, besides Joe, my partner, who knows the truth. And he's no better than the rest - even knowing the truth, having been there from the start, he went ahead and fell in love with her. I guess she took him by surprise. He worships her as wholeheartedly as does everybody else.

So, I guess I'm alone in my freedom from Kathy's influence. And considering how the rest of the world, including Jilly, views Kathy... Well, like I said, I don't blame her. In her shoes, I'd suspect me, too.

* * *

Over the nine years since we started the *Kathy Girl* campaign, the Schuester Agency skyrocketed from a nothing, two man operation - mostly designing logos and magazine layouts, mostly going broke - to the corporate monster it is today, tied into a full line of subsidiary companies peddling cosmetics, designer clothing, perfumes, books and videos, and a chain of complete makeover Kathy Girl spas, now in fourteen countries. The spas are little, glittering cities unto themselves, where women can find the whole Kathy Girl experience - including a convenient, yet discreet, cosmetic surgery clinic - all under one large roof.

Our beginnings had been simple: A failing cosmetics company had hired our failing advertising agency, asking us, basically, to save their butts, commercially speaking.

We went to work. How do you sell second-rate cosmetics in an already flooded marketplace, to women already jaded by trumped up claims and promises from the Majors that never came true?

You make better promises. Not necessarily ones you can keep, just better. They have to be so much better that it looks like a revolution, like something genuinely new is happening. You have to fool the consumer watchdogs. You have to get women outside the industry, women with powerful public images, to back your claims - and not for money, either; anyone can smell that ploy. The illusion has to be seamless, so thorough that actresses, women's

magazine editors, afternoon talk show hosts - with luck, even the First Lady, herself - will use your product and publicly back you because they're as taken in as everybody else.

The Kathy Girl idea was mine, and I'm proud of it. It was pure genius.

The idea was to create a whole new standard of feminine beauty to place before the buying public - in magazines, on television, in movies - a woman so beautiful, so idealized, so absolutely perfect that no one could look at her without loving her. Without wanting to be her. Without cringing inside with self-loathing for being less perfect than *She*. Then you simply create in the public mind a direct causal link between your product and this new standard of beauty. If you're smart, you'll make them mortgage their homes to buy it.

Now, of course, this approach is not new. It's been the heart of American advertising for a century, with bikini-clad women hawking everything from soda pop to deodorant to automobiles. It's our most effective technique, but success is always uncertain - and when you get it, fleeting - for this reason: *there is no perfect woman*.

People's tastes differ. Some will get instantly hooked by the image you present, becoming loyal customers, regardless of the product's actual performance. Others will just crinkle their noses and keep buying Coke or Budweiser or Ford because you haven't hit their personal desires or insecurities hard enough to cause real pain; they're already addicted to your competitor's drug, and you haven't convinced them that yours might offer greater bliss.

So you never get more than a segment of the market, and even that you only get for a while, because tastes also change with time. Eventually, somebody finds a better looking model, thus redefining for the buying public what, in their heart of hearts, they love, what they aspire to be. Your empire crumbles, and you have to start again.

But not with Kathy Girl. If tastes differ, I reasoned, if what people idolize changes, then you have to have a model that differs, that changes. At the speed of whim. And not just public whim, either, but individual whim. You need a model who appears differently to

each set of eyes that beholds her, to each aching heart that yearns for more than they were born with. You need a model who can reflect back to each individual, in each changing moment, their own deepest image of the Perfect Beauty they long for, and would sell their souls to attain.

You need a perfect illusion. And for once, the Gods of Illusion were on our side.

We created Kathy on the Morton X-G, a new holographics computer we were hired to advertise for Morton Computers, a two day old, one man company born out of Bill Morton's invention of this new technology. When we discovered that the X-G was a Morton Company secret - that paranoid old Bill hadn't even sought a patent yet, for fear of corporate spies - we convinced our cosmetics account to chance their last dollar forcibly acquiring Morton Computers, then quietly liquidating it, then even more quietly erasing all evidence of its ever having existed from the public record.

Joe and I took care of old Bill.

The X-G was a dream, a magic box unlike anything the world has seen since Pandora etched her groove in the Collective Memory. We fed four thousand photographs of the world's leading models, of famous actresses, of women we'd seen men ogling on the street, even snapshots of Jilly, and Joe's wife, Sicily, into one end, and FWUMP, out the other end stepped Kathy.

She looked like Jilly, the way I remember Jilly being when we first met. Thin, deep-set, mysterious brown eyes, straight, dark hair that hung to her waist in back, that fell in two curving crescents in front, framing her large breasts like careless ribbons draped around a just-opened gift.

Joe saw no one of the kind. He saw Linda Terell, a short-haired Olympic skier who, at least physically, he had always preferred to his wife.

We knew we had *it*. We did a little fine tuning, so the image never exactly matched any known woman, and Kathy Girl, the advertising campaign, was born.

It was as though the buying public, like Kafka's *Hunger Artist*, had been fasting all these years because they'd simply never found the food they liked. Suddenly, that food was everywhere - first in 30 second TV spots, then magazine ads, the cover of Vogue, then Kathy made her first movie...

The world spun into a cosmetics-buying frenzy. Our commissions rolled into the millions. Our client owned those first ads, but we, wisely, had made sure only the Schuester Agency owned Kathy. We cut the client loose and began building our empire.

*Be a Kathy Girl!* we shouted, and the world cried, *How?* and opened their pocketbooks.

So we offered them makeup, clothing, hair dyes, perfumes, $500 a head *Be a Kathy Girl!* seminars; then we put it all together and opened the first Kathy Girl Spa, which, within the first week, had a three year waiting list. Mothers lined up for blocks outside toy stores the day we released the first Kathy Girl doll, only $99, backed by the slogan *Raise Her Right! Raise a Kathy Girl!*

And they did. Nine years later, we'd created a whole new generation of Happy Consumers. As aspiring Kathy Girls got more beautiful, so, in their eyes, did Kathy. They got older; Kathy never aged. They starved themselves eating Kathy Girl Diet Dinners, while Kathy never ate, or had to worry about weight. They pushed Kathy to levels of beauty so far beyond human norms that some began to crack up from trying to comprehend such a vision; Kathy pushed them to states of inner hunger so acute that they simply stopped seeing themselves at all, and surrendered everything to satiating the need.

Some stopped eating altogether, spending the money they saved on more product. They abandoned young husbands, as Kathy was eternally single. Thousands had given in completely, selling all their worldly goods to live quiet, cloistered lives in little villages that had begun springing up outside the Kathy Girl spas, waiting there like cocooned larvae for their Day of Resurrection - the day their appointment would finally come up, and they would be ushered inside.

The work it took to maintain all this was killing me. And my wife would never understand. She believed the lie.

* * *

"Look," I started, "You know damned good and well..."

"Save it, Mr. Executive," Jilly interrupted. She turned and moved off toward the bedroom.

I heard the closet door slide open, then a *thwump!* as something heavy hit the bed. By the time I reached the bedroom, she had the suitcase open and was filling it with clothes.

"You know all my arguments, Baby," I said, switching to the apologetic croon I used whenever she threatened to leave. "Please. I hate it as much as you do. I'd be home with you all the time if I could, but I can't. You know the score."

She dropped the blouse she'd been folding, then plopped down on the bed, beside the suitcase. She looked up at me, her expression softening. She was about to cry.

"I know, I know," she said. "You and your responsibilities... But things have changed, Ron. Look at me."

I looked. Things had changed, alright - at least her appearance. Had she done this for me? To keep me home?

I crossed the room and knelt before her. I touched her hand, but she pulled it away. She avoided my eyes, turning instead to stare off toward the window.

"I've met someone new," she said.

I pulled her hand to me, held it tight. I felt my cheeks burning.

"And you did this for him? This is what he wants?" I hated her new look, but I hated even more that she might have done it for someone other than me. Or at least, for Christ's sake, for herself...

She turned now to stare me in the face, her eyes wide with anger or surprise, maybe both. Tears welled on her eyelids.

"What's happened to you, Ron?" she said, her voice shaking. "Are you really so busy in your ivory tower that you've forgotten what *she* looks like? Have you gone blind? I'm her now. I'm Kathy now!"

"Kathy isn't real," I said. "And she doesn't look anything like you. At least, not anymore."

Jilly pulled against my grip, and I let her go. She began to rummage through the suitcase, ruining her neat packing job as she dug around for something under the clothing. She pulled out a magazine, then closed and locked the bag. She slapped the magazine into my hand.

"I have to go," she said. "I have to get to your show before it ends. But you at least deserve a look at your replacement... Since it was you, really, who brought us together. Page twelve."

She stood, picked up her bag, moved to the door. The tears were now streaming freely down her face.

"He's so much like you, Ron. Like you were when we first met. It's spooky."

I watched her turn away, then listened as she banged her way through the kitchen, then the living room. The door to the hallway opened and closed.

I was alone in the apartment. I sat on the bedroom floor, stunned, listening to see if maybe she'd change her mind, if the front door would open again and she would come back to me.

Silence.

I waited for hours, watching the moon rise outside the little bedroom window, vacillating between hating Jilly for leaving me, and hating her new boyfriend for... existing. Finally, still sitting there on the floor, I opened the magazine she'd left, ready for a glimpse of my "replacement."

Page twelve.

He didn't look anything like me, though I could understand why she went for him. He was beautiful; he looked exactly how I'd always longed to look - dark hair, powerful jaw line, cleft chin, a sharp, aquiline nose...

Gazing at the guy's picture, I felt a strange pain growing in my chest, opening like a fiery pit that singed me hollow. If I'd looked like this, the fire seemed to say, then maybe Jilly...

Then I noticed the blurb beneath him, painting the sidewalk under his shoes like God's own handwriting, like burning letters lighting up a lonely desert sky:

*BE A MARK MAN!*

Then in the corner of the page, this note: *The new spring line for men, from Schuester Enterprises, Inc.*

This is going to kill me, I thought. Great idea, Joe.

I stood and crossed over to my own small closet. I slid back the door and began to ruffle through its contents - the suits and ties, the jackets and designer shirts that now seemed so ugly, so hideously inappropriate to the look I now wanted, that I needed...

Yes, this is going to kill me, I told myself again as I slammed the closet shut with an angry thrust.

I felt my hand move reflexively to my back trouser pocket, checking the status of my wallet, my many credit cards. I stopped the hand and raised it to my eyes, turning it before me like some strange, alien artifact.

And, I realized - watching the hand struggle to complete its mission, wondering why I hadn't thought of this one myself, not sure whether to laugh or cry - I am going to die rich.

I laughed.

Make that richer.

# Who Is the Fish?

It was neither anything as simple as Bertram Diebold's cold pizza dinner weaving spice trails through his intestines, nor anything so complex as some glowing, spectral presence tapping messages against the little window beside his bed that set the dream into motion; all was still, and the dream simply began:

*A crowded city bus... dirty... loud...* A multilingual din raked the stale air around him as his fellow passengers chatted away in frantic staccato bursts, in song-like phrases with too many vowels, in rolled R's and wide gestures that never quite blended - a cacophony without rhythm or meaning that stung his ears, that made his teeth hurt.

Bertram turned away from the motley assemblage of bag-ladies and housewives, of long-haired boys in blue jeans and old blind men restlessly tapping their canes to scan the street beyond through the dust-caked window. The bus rounded a corner, and he spotted a street sign; the letters danced and flowed in his vision, refusing to form into intelligible words.

From beside him, spoken English, a woman's voice: *Pay attention, you fool!*

Bertram spun away from the window. "What...?"

He was alone in the seat - but now, clutched tightly in his right hand was a slim, hardbound book. He scanned its gleaming cover, but, again, the letters of its title flowed like mercury off the page.

Pay attention to what?

He tried to set the book onto the empty seat beside him, but it refused to leave his hand. He folded his arms across his chest, pushing the book deep under his jacket and out of sight.

Again the sourceless voice: *Just pay attention.*

"Fine," he said aloud. He straightened in the seat, cleared his throat. "I will."

An argument broke out at the front of the bus. A heated male voice, speaking in English, broke through the buzzing wall of conversation, washing gradually over it, consuming it. The babble subsided until only the one voice remained:

"Surely, you can't be serious," the voice boomed out. "These so-called *'teachers'* of yours tell you the universe is such and such and so and so, you memorize their words... and, for you, what they say becomes truth? The final word? What rubbish!"

The voice dropped to a reptilian stage-whisper:

"You appear to know a great deal, my friend, but you know nothing. While you study the false world, the real world lies dying at your fingertips. Your *'science'* cannot save it. You know many great words, but you are a fool!"

Bertram's breath quickened, his cheeks burned with rage. *I am, am I...?*

He tried to stand, to seek out the source of this new rude voice, but he could only turn his head; his body refused to budge.

*Not yet*, came the feminine voice beside him. It seemed closer now. The words seemed to rise up from his own chest.

"But..."

The passengers in the seats ahead of him vanished and Bertram suddenly had a clear view ahead:

In the first aisle seat on the right sat an enormous man dressed entirely in black. His sharp jaw and muscular frame made him seem formidably masculine - a classic Robert E. Howard Cro-Magnon thug. Yet the finely tailored, black tuxedo - even the frilly shirt was black - through which the muscles bulged gave him a strangely effeminate cast: A European lord, a dandy, forced by circumstances to mingle with the ordinary. He even appeared to hover a little over the seat, as if afraid of contamination.

Across from the shadowy man sat a small, equally-dark woman. Bertram could make out nothing of her beyond her darkness. She seemed not to have an existence separate from the dark stranger she faced, a mere prop for the man's performance.

He's speaking to her, Bertram realized. He's attacking that poor girl, and nobody's lifting a finger to stop him...

His paralysis broke as unseen hands lifted him from his seat and rushed him to the woman's defense. He looked first to her, but she refused to meet his gaze. He turned to her assailant.

From a distance, the man had appeared large; up close, he was a giant. Bertram's breath froze in his chest as his indignation turned to fear. He tried to turn away, to slink unnoticed back to his seat, but his legs would not move. He felt his jaw dropping, listened with dread fascination as strange words began to tumble in a frantic stream from his own mouth:

"This is the other world!" Bertram heard himself exclaim. "This is where the doorway leads - and I say we must not only open that door, but pass through it, maybe even physically!"

The words made no sense. The burning intensity behind them even less. What am I saying? What does this mean? As if in reply, he heard his own voice continue:

"The world of Spirit is subject to the same natural laws that shape the physical world! It can be saved!"

He felt his hand reaching into his jacket, raising the name-less book over his head. His body stretched into the stiff pose of a backwoods preacher punctuating the day's Gospel lesson with a final threat of Eternal Damnation.

"And this," he proclaimed boldly, "is the key!"

The posture had transformed Bertram's fear back into indignation, into self-righteous anger. He hung over the dark giant like a fiery cloud, the book raised high, challenging the massive stranger to respond.

The man continued to gaze past Bertram, staring through him at the woman. He answered the intrusion with studied, silent indifference.

"Well?" Bertram demanded.

The stranger shook his head. He crossed his tree trunk legs femininely, at the knee, and answered without looking up.

"Maybe so," he said. His lips twisted into a thin smile. "Maybe so."

With ferocious power, the man shot from his seat and gripped the collar of Bertram's jacket. He towered over Bertram, lifted him free of the bus's metal floor.

Bertram's fire winked out; his burning cloud dissipated back to gray, wispy fear. He looked to the bus driver for help, but the man stared impassively ahead, seemingly unaware of the violent scene taking place behind him. He swung back to face his attacker, and felt the book fall away from his trembling fingers as he met the dark stranger's eyes…

The man had no eyes. Pools of blackness swirled like oil in empty sockets.

Bertram choked as his breath stopped altogether. He could not pull away from the man's dark gaze. The swirling pools engulfed him, filled him with the same penetrating blackness...

"Yes, my friend, this is the other world," the stranger rasped. "And I am the Gate, opened at last for you. Are you prepared to cross?"

Bertram felt himself dissolving into the slow swirl of the stranger's eyes. The bus, with all its passengers, faded around him.

They were now on the street. The once bustling city was vacant - no people, no cars, no one to hear him should he find the strength to cry out; a tumbleweed drifted lazily by. Bertram renewed his struggle, but only flopped helplessly in the stranger's grasp. He surrendered and the street, too, vanished.

He was surrounded by darkness; he had become darkness...

... And in the heart of the Darkness, Bertram saw the Fish. A great golden fish hung suspended in the void. It glowed with a throbbing, self-contained Light that did not penetrate the surrounding Darkness. It stood alone, the only object in view, distinct from the vast, endlessly uniform ocean surrounding it.

Bertram was now a part of that ocean, existing without form. As he watched the Fish spinning in the Darkness, his heart pounded with longing:

The Fish *Was*; the Darkness *Was Not*. Bertram longed *to Be*. He longed to share in the Fish's individuality, its freedom to stand proudly apart from the endless black sea...

The Fish exploded. The Light that had been contained now burst over the void. Bertram felt his own dark nothingness penetrated and set ablaze by the luminous onslaught as shockwaves rolled further and further out from the center of the explosion.

He felt the Light and Darkness merge within him, becoming something new - something that was neither fully Darkness nor fully Light. Nor was it simply a mixture of the two. The new substance was solid; it pulsated no longer with Light, but with Life...

Bertram was a new creature - a Living Being.

And suddenly he, too, was shaped roughly like a fish. He had acquired form, individuality, freedom...

The Great Fish's fire burned deep within his being and, with uncontrolled joy, Bertram thrashed his new-formed tail through the dark ether in a frantic dance of celebration. All around him in the sea of Darkness, an infinite number of softly glowing fish like himself danced, jumped and played. Their motion was a song of joy, a hymn of gratitude for this gift of shared Self...

At long last, the Light had come upon the Darkness, and the Darkness had found it good.

The voice of the stranger boomed through the teeming ocean of Life, filling it, echoing through and beyond the newborn Bertram:

*"Witness, my friend, the mystery of Creation…"*

Then Bertram heard his own tiny voice singing in reply, *but who is the Fish?*

His song rippled out through the ocean of Life, but returned to him unanswered.

* * *

Bertram bolted upright in the bed, suddenly wide awake. He reached for the screaming alarm clock, but pulled back as cool morning air hit the sweat that soaked his too-thin body. He shivered and pulled the blankets up to his neck. He let the clock scream.

*Who is the Fish?* The words echoed in his mind. He closed his eyes and tried to memorize the details of the dream before they faded away; a chill snaked up his spine, a mild current like slow lightning... It reached his head and seemed to push him gently forward. He was about to remember something important, something vast...

*Who is the Fish?*

He sat, huddled forward, eyes tight, waiting for the lightning to strike. But after a moment, the feeling passed. Whatever it was, he had lost it.

* * *

***MISTAH KURTZ - HE DEAD!***

The spoon fell from Bertram's hand, splashing milk and cornflakes onto his newly arrived copy of *Lit-World Weekly*. He wiped the page frantically with his sleeve.

*Renowned science fiction author H.F. Kurtz died this week, on March 2, victim of a massive stroke that left him paralyzed for three days before finally claiming his life. Kurtz is best known for his allegedly drug influenced "trip novels" of the 1960's, several of which won the science fiction community's highest honors - the Hugo and Nebula awards. He retired from writing throughout the '70s, then reappeared in 1981 with a new 2000 page novel, which was published as the trilogy Cosmogenesis, Voice of the Beloved and Reconciliato. These comeback novels, however, while embraced by a few loyal readers in hardcore SF circles, were universally rejected by critics as esoteric and unapproachable (see reviews, p. 48).*

*In the years following their publication, the Kurtz trilogy spawned an ill-defined, cult-like movement within science fiction, both its literature and its fandom, espousing Kurtz's esoteric rambling as factual, and calling themselves "Kurtzians." Kurtz, for his part, openly labeled the sub-culture "misguided," though it was rumored that he, clandestinely, had either*

*founded the movement, or at least played an active role within it. Kurtz publicly denied all such claims.*

*He retired again in 1982, after his trilogy was denied a second printing due to low sales and negative press. He spent his last years as a recluse, only occasionally stepping into the public eye to accept awards or to lambaste his fanatical following. Whether he wrote during these years of seclusion, whether posthumous works can be expected, is not yet known.*

*But his body of published works lives on. The unique spirit of H.F. Kurtz, approachable or otherwise, will be sorely missed.*

But it was neither the article, nor its tasteless headline, that had loosened the spoon from Bertram's fingers. Beside the obituary was a grainy black and white photo of Kurtz - a massive, tall man wearing a dark, finely tailored tuxedo; equally dark frills puffed ominously from his muscled chest. He stood at a podium before a blurred sea of faces, accepting, according to the caption, a Lifetime Achievement Award at the World Science Fiction Convention of 1988. It had been his last public appearance before his death.

Bertram stared into the picture, his jaw slack. He felt the strange pressure in his head, pushing him forward. He struggled to remember.

Was H.F. Kurtz the stranger in his dream? A dead science fiction writer?

He searched the picture for a glimpse of the man's eyes. The photo's poor quality left them in shadow, blurred like the uniform sea of faces surrounding him. His eyes appeared empty, hollow, swirling pools of darkness...

Bertram flipped quickly to the book review section, leaving a finger to mark the obituary. Sure enough, the critics panned Kurtz's final three novels - but, oddly, the article also announced their "long awaited return" in paperback.

He turned back to the obituary and, for a long moment, studied the shadowy picture. Then he closed the magazine, folded it, and dropped it into the open briefcase on the floor beside him.

The cornflakes had turned to mush; he pushed them away.

* * *

Mounds of dirty snow still bordered the New Frontiers, Ltd. parking lot as Bertram pulled in for the day. But the cleared blacktop sparkled in the morning sunlight. The wind in his face as he traced the cobblestone path toward the big glass door was warm.

Spring was coming. Bertram smiled.

When he reached his own small office on the fourteenth floor, he made a valiant effort to pour through the latest "inspirational novel" waiting boxed like a sealed prayer on his desk. But - while the typeface didn't dance or flow like mercury, while each word was stable - he still found it unreadable. The strange dream, the grainy photograph, their disturbing connection danced instead in his mind, pulled his attention away from the creaking prose of yet another housewife author with too much time on her hands, a head full of New Age platitudes, and the mistaken belief that *anyone with half a mind to write a book should...*

The mild current still tingled in his mouth - a tart aftertaste, a physical memory. He kept expecting something to happen, either in the novel or in the room around him.

By page five of the manuscript, it was clear that nothing was going to happen in either place. He dropped the pages back into their box, signed a generic New Frontiers one-liner, *Your manuscript has been read...*, then considered feigning illness and going home. He pulled the copy of Lit-World Weekly from his briefcase, slapped it listlessly a few times against his palm, scanned the back-page ad for yet another leather-bound edition of Shakespeare's collected works...

"Hey."

Bertram dropped the magazine into his lap, and looked up. His fiancée, Christine Asher, stood before him, a slender, golden-haired angel - a sight as glorious to Bertram's tired eyes as...

As a perfect excuse. He broke into a wide grin. "Hey back."

The girl dropped her purse wearily onto the desk. “Seven A.M.," she started in, "and I wake up to Bootsie retching on the bed, all over the apartment..." She plopped down beside the purse, grimacing.

"*Bad tuna* the vet says, and hands me a bill for fifty bucks! Fifty bucks *for bad tuna...*"

Bertram glanced at his watch. "You took the whole day off? You don't have to go in?"

"... and lost wages, too! That cat..."

Bertram clapped his hands, circled around the desk, and pulled the girl to him. He kissed her then whispered into her ear.

Christy smiled and nodded. After Bertram had retrieved his briefcase and the fallen magazine, she allowed him to lead her down the narrow hallway. They stopped before an open door and Bertram peeked tentatively inside.

"Big Emergency, Sid!" He pushed into the office, dragging Christy with him. "It's...Ah... Christy's cat. He's dying."

"No kidding?" Sid leaned back into his chair and surveyed the couple shifting nervously before him. He stowed a pencil behind his ear, folded his hands across his chest.

"Is this true?" he asked the girl. "Bertram wouldn't know a dying cat from an overfed guppy."

Christy nodded, *mmmhmm'd* through closed lips, then looked away.

"Gotta go," Bertram prodded. "Okay?"

Sid smiled knowingly, then reached again for the pencil. He began to scribble on the manuscript spread out on his desk. "Young love..." He chuckled softly. "Go on, you two. Go save your cat."

Over lunch, Bertram described to his fiancée the strange dream. Then he showed her the Lit-World article, the dark photograph. The picture, again, drew him gently forward... He looked away.

"If it weren't for the picture," Bertram said, "I'd write the whole thing off. Another weird dream. Big deal." He dumped a packet of sugar into his tea, then went on without stirring it in. "But I'm telling you, Christy, they're not just similar. It's the same guy. I know it."

The sugar hovered a moment on the floating ice, then dropped in one lump to the bottom of the glass.

"I've got this feeling like I'm biting on tinfoil," Bertram continued through clenched teeth. "It's physical. It won't let me just forget."

Christy smiled. "My shrink would have a field day with you, Bertram." She dropped a long spoon into his iced tea and began to stir. The sugar spread through the dark liquid in slow, swirling waves. "One weird dream plus one blurred picture equals... what? Not all coincidences are meaningful, you know."

Bertram watched the sugar swirl up, dissolve, the sugar and tea combined, both changed in the process...

"And some are," he said. He clicked his teeth together loudly. "Tinfoil. Ouch."

Christy frowned, released the spoon, and signaled for the waitress.

As they walked toward the car - bright sunlight overhead, his girl at his side, free for the day - Bertram's somber mood lifted. Christy was probably right. Could he be certain he hadn't simply rearranged his memory when he saw the picture, made some associative link, rather than having dreamed, specifically, of Kurtz - a man he'd never before seen? Might he have seen Kurtz's picture somewhere and forgotten it? He worked for a publisher, for God's sake. He subscribed to *Lit-World Weekly, Book Review Quarterly, American Fiction...*

So maybe Kurtz just fit a certain mold - a physical type, a generic Archetypal figure. Exactly the brand of Dark Stranger he'd expect his dreaming brain to dredge up when it needed one. Meaningless.

"You're right," he said as he unlocked the passenger door of the car and pulled it wide. "Much ado about nothing. I probably just need some time away from inspired housewife authors and..."

He froze. The woman at his side, the woman now lowering herself into the passenger seat of his car, was not Christy. A small, dark woman with short, jet-black hair now sat in his car, watching him, a welcoming smile on her strangely familiar lips. He felt himself being pulled gently forward. He closed his eyes, took a breath.

"Well, you've got one day off," the dark woman said. "And you've got me, you lucky man, to spend it with."

Bertram refused to open his eyes. He leaned against the car door, shaking, unable to breath. "Who..."

"Bertram? Are you okay?"

Bertram rubbed his eyes, then stared down at the restored Christy. He managed a weak smile.

"No," he said, "I am not okay." Then after a pause, he added, "Read any good books lately?"

* * *

The alarm clock screamed and Bertram woke with a start. He slapped wearily at the nightstand and managed to silence the little box by knocking it to the floor.

*00:L ...* He rubbed his eyes and looked again - *7:00.* He'd been asleep less than an hour, but he had been dreaming. He peeled back the covers and scrambled for the nightstand drawer, for the pen and notebook he'd stashed there the previous evening:

*I was again a golden fish swimming in the void. Within me, inside my body, was a man. I knew I was the man as well as the fish, but the man was unaware of me. He saw only himself, his own face reflected back to him from the mirror-like walls.*

*I called out to him, be he couldn't (or wouldn't) hear me. His full attention was snared by a series of dark, shifting images that danced behind his reflection like a shadow-play. I could plainly see that what he was taking for reality was only a mirage, a phantom of the real world, my world, twisted and distorted by the thick screen of my fish belly through which he viewed it all. His "reality" was but a dim, filtered reflection of my own.*

*And superimposed over each shadow scene was the man's own reflection. He stood there, smiling, smugly self-satisfied, master of all he surveyed. An angry voice filled the void, proclaiming: "An evil and unfaithful generation seeks a sign, but no sign will be given except the sign of Jonah..."*

Bertram stopped writing and closed the notebook. He dropped it back into the drawer, yawned, rubbed his tired eyes again, then

stood and shuffled off to the small kitchenette in search of strong black coffee.

He poured his traditional cornflakes, added milk, then moved to the counter to challenge the little Braun with ten scoops of Old Judge. He leaned back and listened as it hissed and moaned, the warm scent of brewing coffee holding him there, still half asleep, half dreaming.

This is the bachelor's life, he told himself sullenly. And you almost got to keep it, Mr. Suave... *Jesus*.

Christy hadn't much liked his suggestion that they spend their day off together book shopping. When he'd abandoned her in the magazine aisle, then reappeared with two of Kurtz's reissued novels under his arm, she'd stopped talking to him. When he'd complained that he was tired, that he wasn't good company, and that he might as well go home and rest rather than spoil her fun, she'd turned slowly away, taken a few steps, then spun back, a thin smile frozen on her lips.

"Whatever you say, *Father Diebold*."

"Father Diebold?" he'd questioned cautiously.

The smile vanished. "A fitting title for a celibate mystic like yourself."

*"Ah,"* was the only reply Bertram had found to make.

But after the silent drive back to Christy's apartment, as Bertram stood beside the car, watching her walk away, she'd granted a reprieve. At the door of the brownstone building, she'd turned back, yelled to him across the small yard, "You'll pay for this, Bertram!"

"I know," he'd called back. He'd never doubted that. He'd only doubted whether he'd be offered a chance to try.

Then Christy had flashed him a sweet, unexpected smile. She'd waved. "I'll see you Saturday?"

"Saturday..." But she had already disappeared inside. He'd driven away, one hand on the wheel, one hand thrumming happily at the shiny new books on the seat beside him, his heart pounding in his throat with the sure knowledge that Christy was a better woman than he deserved...

The little Braun coughed loudly and died. Dirty mug in one hand, steaming carafe in the other, Bertram moved back to the table. The cornflakes had turned to mush, and he pushed them away.

It had taken a whole night to pour through the first volume of Kurt's trilogy, *Cosmogenesis*. Staring at it now, holding it up like a shield between himself and the drowned cereal, Bertram found it hard to believe he'd read it at all, let alone finished it only an hour before. Like the stranger's eyes in the dream, the book had sucked him in, engulfed him, flooded him with images of Darkness and Light, with terror that became joy, recognition that sank into confusion, then doubt, full bewilderment - that burst through the novel's final pages into...

Nothing. For, also like the dream, he'd come out the other side of *Cosmogenesis* less certain of what was going on than before he'd started. Maybe the book and the dream - now dreams - were equally meaningless, equally worthless; maybe obliqueness was the only genuine connection between them.

He set the book aside, went back to the counter, dug through the drawer until he found pen and paper, then returned to the table. In block letters, at the top of the page, he wrote:

**CONNECTIONS**

Then he began a careful list of details from the book that might, if written out, come together to help make sense of the last twenty-four hours:

**1) The Fish**

Cosmogenesis had its Fish, but it wasn't really a fish. It was a fish-shaped spaceship, The *Icthus*, from planet-unnamed, that appeared one night to the novel's protagonist in a dream. The Good Ship Icthus, the dream revealed, had entered Earth orbit carrying enough of some mystery substance to do something to the planet - either blast it backward through a zillion years of counter-clocked entropy to re-seed the original Big Bang, or else forward through a zillion

years of high-speed evolution to some future point that amounted to pretty much the same thing, a new Big Bang in circular time. Which of these out-comes would occur was never made clear.

Whether anything was "really" happening at all was never made clear.

## 2) Kurtz

The closest thing the novel's poor protagonist had to a friend was a Mephistophelian science fiction writer Named H.F. Kurtz. Kurtz had painted himself in the novel, at least physically, true to form - a hulking shadow figure, an Archetypal Dark Stranger. The two met on a city bus shortly after the initial dream. Throughout the novel, the Kurtz character accompanied the protagonist through various levels of post-dream anxiety, offering ultra-literate theories and "profound" philosophical discourses about the State of the Universe, Mankind, and the protagonist's "obvious psychosis." Mostly he repeatedly explained, in Jungian terms, that the dream, and all the trepidations that followed from it like toppling dominoes, were inner experiences - either the protagonist's Archetypal journey toward individuation, or else his psychotic plummet into utter madness. Which of these was the case was never made clear.

The rest of the novel seemed to have nothing to do with Bertram's dreams:

The protagonist steals a spaceship and jets off to where The Icthus claims to be hiding. When he gets there, he finds the ship, all right, but it's "dead." It's about a zillion years old, a rusted out shell, whose only functioning unit is the transmitter by which it originally contacted the protagonist - and has been, apparently, contacting just about anybody it can reach, including Kurtz. But the vast majority of those contacted, being sane individuals, wrote their dreams off easily as meaningless and went on with their lives. Only the protagonist and, as it turns out, Kurtz, responded.

Bertram scribbled a crude Icthus in the margin of the page, added around it a dozen tiny fish swimming and jumping in a dozen directions, then jotted a final note:

### 3) Dreams

The novel had ended with the protagonist's return to Earth: Kurtz meets him at the spaceport and conks him on the head with a wrench. He wakes up in a hospital, where Kurtz convinces him it was all a dream, that he's cracked completely, and that his only hope is to enter a monastery and sort out, with God's help, his mixed up inner life.

Then Kurtz boards the stolen spaceship and disappears. Where he's going, or why, is never made clear.

*Dreams...* Bertram refilled his mug, then rocked the chair back on two legs. The whole book was written like a dream, illogical, ambiguous - "objective" realities that turn out to be inner states, fugue-like fantasies that turn out to be real, voices from nowhere, characters who seem to trade roles, then switch back - like Christy and the mysterious, dark woman...

In "real" dreams it always, somehow, made sense. The mind had ways of tricking a person into accepting absurdities so he doesn't wake up, doesn't question. Suddenly Bertram's waking life had become dreamlike, ambiguous. Something...

He frowned, and looked again at the page before him: *The Fish, Kurtz, Dreams*. Three words. Nothing; it added up to nothing. One dream plus one crazy novel equals... What? He should take another day off, sleep, apologize to Christy - sanely write it all off and escape the web now, before...

He crumpled the page of notes and hurled it out of sight, toward the living room. Something shattered.

Impossible, Bertram thought. Paper couldn't...

The feather-light wad had toppled a decanter on the low coffee table. Wine pulsed in rapid, red gurgles onto his magazines, newspapers, a book...

Bertram darted across the room and snatched the book from the growing puddle. He frantically wiped it dry on the sleeve of his robe.

*Voice of the Beloved*. The cover, soaked through with wine, tore away; Bertram felt himself pulled gently forward...

## *CHAPTER ONE: THE SIGN OF JONAH*

The web closed. Bertram crossed slowly back to the kitchen, the coverless, wine-stained book in his hands. He started another pot of coffee, called in sick, then unplugged the telephone from the wall.

He didn't want to be disturbed.

* * *

For what seemed the first time ever, Bertram slept a full, dreamless night. He woke up before the alarm sounded. He felt great.

*Screw you, Kurtz*, he thought giddily. He danced lightly to the kitchen, ignored the little Braun, and poured, instead, a tall glass of orange juice. He sat down at the table, picked up the tattered copy of *Voice of the Beloved*, and smiled. He tossed it into the living room. Nothing shattered.

The second book had been straightforward autobiography - sort of. In it, Kurtz claimed that *Cosmogenesis* had been autobiographical, that The Icthus was real, and that he'd gone back, after the last pages of the first novel, to reactivate it. The Icthus, once running, turned out to be a sort of metaphysical teaching machine. Its computer banks contained the original blueprints for Creation - a Creation which, after a zillion years of entropy, was running down. Icthus' mission, Kurtz claimed, was to start Creation over, to generate a New Creation, a new universe, using Humanity as its source material. The mystery-substance Icthus carried was refined evolutionary energy, stored as Cosmic Information. Once this info-energy was absorbed by people, once ingested and understood, it would transform all Humanity into an equivalent energy - *Cosmic Awareness*. The two energies, combined, would explode in a new Big Bang, a New Creation, a new, entropy-free universe...

Reading *Voice of the Beloved* had brought a great relief. Kurtz was insane. That obvious, simple fact explained more than any book, any dream, any imagined vision ever could.

The book had been published in 1981. It must have been written in the late Seventies. One could not, then or now, take a cab to the nearest spaceport and commandeer a ship. Kurtz's science was so inaccurate, his philosophy so "inspired..."

Bertram laughed. He doubted Kurtz could successfully rewire a broken lamp, let alone an ancient, space-going teaching machine. And his claims to Cosmic Knowledge, to Revelation, sounded so much like the channeling housewife authors he rejected every day at New Frontiers...

He downed the orange juice and headed for the bathroom to shower and shave. After two days of paranoid psychosis, he must look like hell. He had to clean up. It was Saturday, and he'd been granted a reprieve. He was meeting the warden of his heart for lunch; he had a debt to repay.

He got to the restaurant early, ordered iced tea - no sugar - and sat quietly at the table, studying a menu. The waitress came and went, Bertram's Timex ground slowly past twelve o'clock, and there was still no sign of Christy.

She was late. She was never late for anything. Bertram pulled his sleeve down over his watch and began to seriously worry that his sentence had been extended, that she'd changed her mind, that he'd blown it with Christy for good...

*Screw you, Kurtz*, he thought again. He felt in no way giddy. He felt sick. His stomach began to churn, and he dumped four packets of sugar into the half-empty glass of tea. He stirred it in angrily, letting the spoon clank loudly around the inside of the glass.

*Damn you, Kurtz!* he shouted in his head. *Damn me...*

Christy appeared at the front of the restaurant. She spotted him, and hurried to the table. She was pale, shaking. Her always-perfect golden hair hung loose over one eye, limp, unkempt.

"I tried to call you..." she started. She sat down, caught her breath.

Oh, Christ... He'd forgotten to reconnect the phone line. "Jesus, Christy, I'm sorry..." he said in a rush of guilty relief; she was here, he had a chance... "I unplugged it. I was reading, and..."

Christy sat in silence, her hands folded before her. She stared into them, moving her thumbs in slow, alternating circles. Her eyes glistened; she had been crying.

"Christy?

"I had one of your dreams," she said. She looked up, met Bertram's worried gaze. “Screw you, Bertram. You're infecting me with this stuff."

"Kurtz is dead," Bertram insisted, as much to himself as to Christy. "And he's nuts, too. None of this is happening. Let it go."

"Kurtz..." A bitter laugh. "This isn't about Kurtz. It's about you."

"*Me?*”

She'd dreamed about a fish - a whale, technically, a gigantic white whale - that washed up on the shore as she strolled alone down a gray, stony beach. It had decided, it told her, that the ocean was just too big; it was tired of struggling to comprehend such enormity. The whale wanted, it claimed, to die on dry land, where it could at least see a stable horizon. It wanted to enjoy the comforting illusion of a small, comprehensible world - at least until the sun baked its skin to a crisp. It preferred a happy, limited death to an agonizing life in the borderless sea...

But now that it had reached land, the whale had a problem. It had noticed the sky - and that, too, was mighty big. Too big for comfort. Could she, please, turn him over, so his eyes faced the sand, so the illusion of a small world could be maintained for the few hours he had left...

"So I start pushing this enormous whale..." She clenched hers hands together on the table and mimicked the giant fish, slowly rolling over. "I've got it about half turned. I'm facing its huge, white stomach, when the thing suddenly splits wide open, guts and water everywhere..."

She spread her hands wide, then balled one up into a fist, raised it toward Bertram.

"Then you, you bastard, stepped out like Jesus Christ Almighty, glowing robes and all."

*"Me?"* Bertram repeated, his eyes on her trembling fist. It's Jonah, not Jesus, he thought - then *Damn you, damn you, damn you, Kurtz!* The second dream, the second book, now this...

His teeth hurt. He closed his eyes and saw a shark tracing circles around a lone swimmer. The man paddled frantically for shore.

"Yes, you." Christy's voice was thin, controlled. Her chair squeaked back from the table. "You told me to forget it. You said it was meaningless. It was just a dream."

Gaping jaws. Teeth. The swimmer tiring, slowing...

"Then you laughed. You laughed at me for caring."

"I'm sorry," Bertram started, "but..."

Churning water. Slow swirling waves... He opened his eyes.

"Well, I don't care," Christy said. She stood and gathered her coat. "Go ahead and laugh. Laugh at yourself, fish boy. Goodbye."

*Dreams...* Bertram watched his fiancée wavering, clutching the chair, on the brink of tears...

But not leaving. Waiting for him to stop her. He stood and offered his hand.

"I care," he said softly. "Come on. I want to show you something."

He took her to his apartment and showed her the transcript of the Jonah dream, the wine stained book. She wouldn't have believed him if he'd just told her. She'd have said he'd made it up, on the spot, to save his own butt.

And she might have been right. He'd had to see it all again himself - to touch the ruined book, to recognize his own handwriting, to let the *Lit-World* picture pull him gently forward one more time - to accept that it was all really happening. That he was awake. That the alarm wasn't moments from sounding and he'd have to write it all down...

"Where's the third book?" Christy asked finally, after reviewing the evidence, after shoving *Cosmogenesis* and *Voice of the Beloved* into her purse for "safe keeping."

Bertram frowned. "There isn't one," he said. "Barnes and Noble says the publisher got bought out. The Kurtz reissues got canceled before *Reconciliato* hit the presses. I was lucky to get those two." He nodded toward her purse.

"What about the original hardback?"

*Used... Used and Rare... Collectible...* With each shop they visited, with each subtle boost in clean shelves, Alistair Cook furnishings and escalating price ranges, *Reconciliato* seemed to dance further and further from feasibility, from existence in reality...

It was like a bad dream. "Haven't seen one in months..." "Sold my last copy yesterday..." "Try me next week..."

Bertram left his name and phone number at every shop they visited, with each doubtfully-nodding proprietor. But when the last stores had closed and their shadows stretched East against darkening sidewalks, they returned to Christy's apartment, empty-handed and sullen.

She let him spend the night.

* * *

Bertram followed the dark woman through a forest at night. A massive, moving wall thundered relentlessly behind them, consuming trees and hills, sucking valleys and grassy plains under its veil of shadow - an unstoppable, black glacier, a hungry, undiscriminating void...

... that fell further and further behind them with each leap, each turn. The mysterious woman navigated the forest like a wild animal - sprinting up sharp inclines, sliding down invisible ravines, climbing where there was no hold. And Bertram followed her easily, move for move. Never did his hand slip or his foot falter. He matched her frantic pace, and even narrowed the gap between them; he could almost touch her. They bounded on, side by side, until the thundering wall was little more than a distant echo...

Bertram touched the dark woman's hand and *knew*: He was not running *away* from the black veil; he'd all along been running *toward* this woman. She was the one created for him at the beginning of time. She was his Anima, his Eve, his *Mother-Daughter-Sister-Lover-Goddess*, and he worshipped her with complete abandon. The newfound skill with which he'd fought to catch her, the new strength

that surged through him as he'd seen her just ahead, coming within reach...

The scene changed:

It was still night, but the forest was gone. Bertram found himself standing in the soft pink glow of a streetlamp, alone, a cold, drizzling rain slowly soaking through his shirt. He hugged himself, shivering.

The dark woman stepped out of a shadow.

"We can run no further," she said. She moved into the pink-lit circle, stood before him, her eyes focused on the wet pavement at their feet.

"Then it's still coming?"

"Yes."

Bertram reached out to touch her; she stepped away. He felt the mild pressure crawling up his spine, pushing him gently forward...

"This is a dream?" A lump rose into his throat as the dark woman looked up, met his gaze, as her impossibly perfect lips formed a soundless, *Yes*.

"And because I know it's a dream," he continued, wishing he could stop, "I have to wake up now?"

He'd lost control. The words were coming of their own. He fought to close his mouth, to clamp his jaw tight as the mysterious woman nodded another silent affirmation.

"I don't want to go," he said finally. "I love you."

"If you love me," she answered gently, "you'll go." She looked away. Her eyes narrowed as she scanned the dark horizon. "Everything depends on you, Bertram. Everything..."

The ground shook as thunder burst directly overhead. The Darkness had found them. A sudden, swirling gale swept down, dividing them. The dark woman clung to the lamppost, but the furious winds drove Bertram back - away from the woman he loved, into the amorphous night...

"Who is the Fish?" his dark beloved called after him. "You must remember, Bertram! Who is the Fish?"

He woke in darkness, his body twisted into a tight, fetal ball, his face and shirt front wet with tears. He wrapped him-self around Christy, and sobbed against her neck.

"What is it?' she whispered. She rolled to face him in the darkness. "What were you dreaming?"

"Damn you, Kurtz," he whispered back, whispered to the darkness, the woman, Christy, the Black Wall... "I don't want to go... I love you..."

"I love you, too, Bertram." She pulled him close and rocked him till they both returned to sleep.

* * *

*The alarm...* Bertram opened his eyes; a telephone was ringing faintly from the next room. He untangled himself from the still-sleeping Christy, slid out of the bed, and slipped quietly from the bedroom. He pulled the door gently closed behind him.

He snatched up the phone. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

A moment of silence. Static.

"Yes, Mr. Diebold. I know what time it is. If I'm disturbing you..."

Bertram glanced down at his bare wrist. He scanned the walls and table for a clock. Nothing... A band of light where the drapes met: it was, at least, morning.

"Sorry," he said. "It must be later than I thought. Christy's asleep, but I can take a message..."

"No," the voice on the line cut in. "I'm calling for you, Mr. Diebold. I run Tollbooth Collectibles, Tenth and Pershing, Downtown. You were here yesterday, looking for H.F. Kurtz's *Reconciliato*. I've got one for you. First edition, too."

"They only made one edition," Bertram grumbled. Something in the voice made Bertram's teeth hurt.

"Even better. Come on down."

More static, a series of clicks, a dial tone.

Christy shifted under the covers, even threw her arms around his neck once, but she refused to wake up. He scribbled a note and

placed it on the nightstand next to the wine-stained *Voice of the Beloved*.

The highway was deserted. Even on Sunday there ought to be people out... He glanced again at his bare wrist; he'd forgotten to put on his watch. An ocean of dull gray clouds made the sun's position unreadable. He took the Tenth Street exit and braked down to the speed limit.

Nobody Downtown, either. He crawled along the empty street, counting intersections: Olive... Grand... A sign he couldn't read, turned the wrong way... Pershing. With no cops in sight, he parked illegally, in a loading zone.

The bookstore was dark, its door locked. Bertram cupped his hands around his eyes and pressed his nose to the dirty glass.

"Hey in there!"

A wiry young man, brown hair to his waist, stood behind a small counter. He was sorting books under a tiny lamp, wiping their covers with a rag, setting them back on the dusty counter... He looked up, nodded, then moved toward Bertram. The lock turned.

"That was quick." He moved off again, putting the counter between them as Bertram stepped into the shop. "Here's your book. Two hundred dollars. Cash."

"I'll give you ten," Bertram said. Something in that voice - arrogance, certainly, but... He saw the shark again, circling, a shark with long brown hair, reaching through the water for a book...

"Find another one. The door's that way." The book vanished from the counter and the man returned to his sorting. He smiled impassively, smeared dust over covers in slow, swirling waves...

Bertram felt dizzy. He looked to the door, the book-shark, the door...

"Can I write a check?"

The man pulled a receipt book from a drawer. The dull smile broke into a sharp-toothed grin. "Kurtzians..." He shook his head. "You're all alike."

"And we're everywhere," Bertram warned through clenched teeth. He made out the check, signed it with a flourish, then handed it to

the smiling shark. He shoved the slender volume under his jacket. "Everywhere, friend, Never forget that."

His car had been ticketed. There were still no cops in sight - no other cars, no people. He snatched the ticket and crossed Tenth Street to a row of empty phone booths. Maybe Christy would drive down and meet him, bring the other books...

... What time was it, anyway?...

"Hello?" The girl's voice was still heavy with sleep.

"Good, you're up..."

"Bertram? Bertram, where are you?"

Something in her voice brought a lump to Bertram's throat. She sounded far away, lost... Static rose over the line like a gusting wind, then faded away. Silence.

"Christy?" His pulse was suddenly racing. He swallowed hard. "You didn't find my note? I've got the book. I got a call this morning, and..."

"You got a call here? At my number?"

The mild current shot up his spine. It reached his head and pushed him gently forward…

She was right. They hadn't left her number with Tollbooth Collectibles or any other shop. Or had they? He could no longer remember.

"I can't explain. I don't get it either. I'll come home now."

"Good."

Static. Silence.

"Christy, I love you," he said in a rush, "It's almost over now. Thank you for being so good through all this... Christy?"

"Everything depends on you, Bertram. Everything..."

A series of clicks; the phone buzzed in his hand. Bertram stared into the dead receiver, jaw slack, his brain reverberating with what she hadn't said, what came next...

*Who is the Fish? You must remember, Bertram! Who is the Fish?*

He stumbled from the phone booth and pushed his way onto a crowded bench. There were people everywhere, bustling through the city, peering into closed shops. A small, dark woman pushed past him.

He lunged and missed. The woman scurried off through the crowd, then vanished around a corner. Bertram shot after her, expertly avoiding bystanders, dodging fountains, leaping benches - he reached the corner just in time to watch her board a city bus.

"Wait!"

He ran into the street, waving his arms wildly, threw himself into the path of the hulking vehicle.

The bus stopped. A door slid back, and Bertram climbed abroad, paid his fare. He moved down the aisle, scanning the sea of faces around him for the dark woman.

She wasn't there. He found a seat and stared out the window as the bus pulled again into traffic.

Cars... People... Too many people for a Sunday... He was back in the dream; he recognized that. Maybe he'd wake up soon, beside Christy, shove the books down the garbage disposal before she woke up...

Or maybe it had all been one long dream. Maybe there was no H.F. Kurtz, no trilogy. Maybe he was really Kurtz, dreaming he was Bertram Diebold, dreaming...

*Pay attention you fool!*

"Why?" Bertram sighed, and waved a hand through the empty air beside him. "I know what happens next. Kurtz conks me on the head with a wrench, I enter a monastery, then..."

*Just pay attention.*

"No." He pulled *Reconciliato* from his jacket. "I'm going to figure this out right now, then wake up and forget it ever happened. Screw you."

He opened the book.

*LISTEN*

It was the only word on the page. The buzzing conversation around him suddenly stopped. A deep male voice, speaking in English, boomed through the bus:

"...You know many great words, but you are a fool!"

The passengers one row up shimmered and vanished; Bertram had a clear view ahead. H.F. Kurtz sat in the first aisle seat on the right. Opposite him was the dark woman. They seemed to hover over their seats, watching him, waiting.

He turned a page, looked down.

*GO*

Unseen hands lifted him from the seat, dragged him to-ward the dark couple, planted him before Kurtz. Bertram's breath caught in his throat. His mouth opened, and strange words tumbled out:

"I... I really admire your work..."

Kurtz shot up from the seat and gripped Bertram's jacket, lifted him high.

"This really isn't necessary..."

*"Who is the Fish!"* Kurtz demanded, his arms trembling. *"Who is the Fish!"*

Bertram floundered as Kurtz shook him violently. He couldn't breathe. His teeth hurt. The book flew from his hands to land face-up and open on Kurtz's vacated seat.

*YOU ARE THE FISH*

*"I am the Fish!"* Bertram screeched...

... And found himself standing again, the bus's metal floor solid beneath his feet. He picked up the fallen book, closed it, and handed it to Kurtz.

"That's right, Bertram." Kurtz nodded. He smoothed Bertram's jacket with a large, friendly hand. "You are the Fish."

Kurtz shimmered, shrank, and became the dark woman. She smiled.

"Thank you for remembering, Bertram. I knew you would."

She shimmered and became Christy.

"Everything depends on you, Bertram. Everything..."

Christy's eyes were hollow sockets, in which blackness swirled like oil. Bertram kissed his fiancée gently on the cheek, then met her gaze and let the darkness take him.

* * *

He became aware in slow stages. He was a man. He was a Living Being. He was the Fish. He hung suspended in the void, the only object in view, throbbing with a golden, self-contained light.

"I am the Fish," Bertram said again.

"We are the Fish," a voice echoed back from the void. The voice was no longer angry. It was no longer strange.

It was H.F. Kurtz. It was the dark woman. It was Christy. It was himself. He heard the voice and knew it was his own. He heard the voice and knew it was them all.

"Yes," he agreed. "We are the Fish."

Bertram exploded

# The Return of Horselover Fat

*This story is dedicated to the memory of Philip K. Dick, and to readers everywhere whose lives, like my own, have been touched by his work. The Return of Horselover Fat is fiction, but Phil, Kevin and David are real people, and the VALIS events referred to really happened. Sort of. It's a long story… If you've never heard of PKD, Horselover Fat or VALIS, you might want to visit* philipkdick.com *to discover the larger historical/biographical context in which this story is embedded. You'll be glad you did!* - J.P.K.

* * *

"You guys'll never believe where I've been!" Horselover Fat said as he pushed open the screened door and stepped into the small, sunlit kitchen.

We all looked up. We'd been quietly sipping our coffees, nursing hangovers of varying degrees and configurations brought on by varying levels of commitment to the previous night's "Mother of All Parties" held to celebrate the end of the Persian Gulf War. Though we had, none of us, agreed about the whys and wherefores of the conflict, we'd all been relieved to see it end. No matter how you feel about an issue, to see people stop murdering each other is, we could all agree, a good thing.

Anyway, we all looked up as the kitchen door swung out and Horselover Fat appeared before us.

I'd never met Fat, but I knew all about him. I'd met Kevin and David at BayCon, a San Francisco science fiction convention where they'd been guests of honor. Their fame was based both on the fact that, since Phil's death, they'd each written and published several

critically acclaimed novels, and on the better known fact that they had appeared as characters in one of Phil's Masterworks, *VALIS*, a quasi-autobiographical novel describing his own encounters with God (or something very much like God), his psychological split into two people, his eventual cure at the hands of God (or something very much like that entity), that entity's death, Phil's re-splitting, and an ambiguous ending in which part of Phil jets off to find the dead God, somewhere reborn, and the other part stays home to wait for some sign that said rebirth has occurred.

Kevin and David, having lived through those roller coaster times at Phil's side, were now hot properties as speakers, guests of honor, and panel discussion leaders wherever people met who'd joined the ride later, vicariously, through *VALIS*. Neither seemed to enjoy the odd fame *VALIS* had brought them, too often finding themselves more in demand as fictional characters than as living, contemporary authors in their own right. But both, admittedly, enjoyed the free ticket their fame provided to events such as BayCon.

Besides, they both - though sometimes begrudgingly – understood people's fascination with the *VALIS* events and, consequently, with themselves. Most people only dream of encountering a Larger Reality; they'd done it. Both their lives had been forever changed.

"Shattered," is how Kevin most often phrased it.

So that was how I knew it was Fat standing there in my kitchen, a peculiar beaming smile plastered across his face, pouring himself a cup from the dregs of the coffee pot, and sitting down to, apparently, enjoy the shock his appearance had written on Kevin and David's faces.

It was mostly Kevin that clued me in. David is Catholic - old family Catholic - and is often shocked when the world refuses to conform to a fairly narrow set of expectations as to what's possible. But Kevin is a world class cynic. Nothing surprises him. So when his jaw dropped and his voice fell from Ten A.M.-and-hungover grumbling into *take my life, please* stunned silence, I knew I was in the presence of some-thing way beyond the natural faults of Kevin's admittedly irrational, even hysterical, universe.

Throughout the six weeks or so of the war, the months before that of troops sitting in the desert preparing for a war no one believed would really happen, Kevin hadn't shut up for two seconds. When the first bombs were falling on Baghdad and we all cried and sought each other out and more or less readied ourselves for the Apocalypse apparently coming into being, Kevin had simply thrown the rubber TV-brick at NBC's Tom Brokaw and redoubled his efforts to convince us that the whole thing was a hoax, a conspiracy, that Bush and Hussein were in cahoots from the start, and that the entire thing was a dog and pony show being staged so that the U.S. could establish a permanent military presence in the Middle East, thus gaining control of the oil supply feeding Germany and Japan - America's largest creditors, and the biggest threats to our economic security in the Twenty-First Century.

"Shut up, Kevin," I'd said. "People are dying. Fuck your conspiracy, even if it's true."

He did shut up, closing himself off from the rest of us in a little emotional shell of angry, self-righteous cynicism. But he was not too shocked, either by the war or by our reactions to his theory, to leave the room without first putting a tape in the VCR and pressing "record." He wanted, he said, an objective record of these first hours of the conflict so he could pick it apart later, go through it frame by frame, and prove to us at some later date, when we'd gotten over our belief that what we were seeing was actually happening, that he'd been right all along.

That was Kevin. Nothing surprised him. Nothing broke through his shell of expectation that the world, at its core, was inherently rotten.

So to see Kevin fall into silence, his mouth open and his eyes wide like a child's when meeting Mickey Mouse for the first time off screen - not yet organizing the world into reality and fantasy, not yet reducing the possibilities to "it must be a guy in a costume" - told me two things: 1) The slightly heavyset, gray-bearded man in my kitchen was someone Kevin never expected to see "in the flesh," and 2) it was someone from the *VALIS* experiences, because it was only in talking about those times, which we still did often, that

Kevin expressed any sort of awe, any recognition, however slight, of anything beyond the mundane, mechanical, and universal rottenness of existence.

You see, apparently, at that time, Kevin, too, had met God. The meeting had, apparently, affected him quite deeply. His attempts, and relative success, over the years since to write that experience off as a group delusion had not completely robbed him of the memory of it, or of the deep emotions those memories were capable of stirring in him. They had merely given him a context in which to explain away something he no longer desired to deal with, a way to put the experience behind him, to go on living as Familiar Cynical Kevin, and not as some Zoned-Out Schizophrenic Gnostic Jesus Freak, which is how he invariably described Fat in these conversations.

Horselover Fat, in the novel and in real life, was Phil's alter ego, a projection from Phil's downwardly-spiraling psyche - a sort of Christ figure in his own right that hung around and went crazy in Phil's place. Fat was not "real" in the sense of someone with a birth date and a driver's license and a microfiche file with the Federal Government. He'd simply appeared one day, poured himself a cup of coffee, and announced, "I've met God."

No one was fooled. Kevin, David, and even Phil, to a certain extent, recognized Fat for what he was - a *Tulpa*, a mind-projection, a part of Phil that had become so fucked up that Phil had no other recourse but to push it out, objectify it, allow it to live out its own crazy fate, so as to save himself (Phil) from going down, too.

But this was the mid Seventies. Pop-psychology had become the thing, replacing the gurus and spiritual searches of the Sixties. *"I'm fucked up, you're fucked up"* was the slogan of the hour. For a close friend to whack out before your eyes was, at that time, no big deal. It was everyone's eventual destiny; one had only to wait for ones turn to come around. When it was a friend, one was expected to be "supportive." You just coped; you might be next.

So Fat was a figment of Phil's imagination, and the two had been wedded from the start. They'd had very little choice: Tulpas are a sticky business to begin with; unintentionally projected ones are even more complicated. Once Fat appeared on the scene, he and Phil's

lives became symbiotically linked. If one died, they both died. They shared a fate. They both, eventually anyway, came to recognize this.

But Kevin and David had a choice. They could have turned away, shunted Phil off to a loony bin and settled the matter right there. But Fat was, for all his craziness, a likable guy. And to abandon Phil in his hour of need would have been unthinkable. So Kevin and David had accepted Fat, included him in the circle. Over the proceeding years they befriended him, ridiculed him, helped him, and joined him in his delusions, in that order.

But when Fat boarded a plane headed for the Pelew Islands, in search of the newborn Savior, they'd figured, at least, they wouldn't have to deal with him for a while. When Phil died from a stroke in 1982, they figured they'd never have to deal with Fat again, which on the one hand was a relief, but, on the other, was sad because, after all, they'd liked him. He was, for all his craziness, an okay guy. They'd miss him almost as much as they would miss Phil.

So now a man had walked into my kitchen, said, "You guys'll never believe where I've been," poured a cup of coffee, and sat down at the table to two stunned faces, and my own quizzical expression, which slowly changed to awe as I studied, and reacted to, the change in Kevin.

I'd seen that look before. There was no question. The stranger now at my table was either Phil or Fat, and Phil was dead, so it had to be Fat. I mean, reasonably, if Phil was dead Fat should be dead, too. Then again, Fat's existence had never been reasonable, whereas Phil's had been the normal flesh-and-blood, mortal: two parents thing. Since I don't buy into all that bodily resurrection stuff, and the war was over, so Judgment Day, complete with trumpets and opening graves seemed unlikely, I stand by the rationality of my assessment that Horselover Fat, a Tulpa projected by a human mind no longer in existence, was sitting in my kitchen.

"You've changed, Fat," David said, a bewildered smile replacing his previous expression of dull shock. "You've put on weight. You're tanned as hell. You look good, Man"

"I've been hanging out in the desert," Fat said. "Persia." He sipped his coffee, head dipped down to the cup, gripping the hot

mug with both hands as he raised it to his lips. Then, still hunched over, he lifted his balding head. He rolled his eyes in big, comic circles, fixing them, finally, on Kevin - who continued to stare, open-mouthed and silent.

Fat grinned.

"For once in your life, you were right," Fat said, looking at Kevin, but addressing the whole room. "About the war, I mean."

Kevin exploded from the chair, sending it flying across the scarred linoleum. He spun away from Fat, leaning his clenched fists against the sink. His shoulders trembled.

"Goddamit, David, we said no hard drugs at this party."

He turned back to face us. Fat still hunkered over his coffee, his grin widening.

"No drugs," Fat said, winking slyly toward David. "No psychotic break. Two equal impossibilities: I am really here, and you were really right."

"Explain," Kevin said. He crossed his arms before him, closing himself off.

"Babylon has been restored," Fat said, his voice low, his eyes moving back to the cup in his hands. "Hussein began excavation of the ancient site in the Eighties. The place is completely restored now. The cults are operating full tilt, even as we speak. I've seen them."

Kevin retrieved his chair and sat again beside the table. I tilted my chair back and tried for invisibility; I wasn't yet sure my presence was appreciated.

*"Deedle deedle queep,"* Kevin said, which was our insider's term for Big Fucking Deal. "So Hussein has a hobby? What difference does it make?"

"It's one of the signs," David said. "In the last days, the City of Babylon returns in all its degeneracy. The Great Whore of Babylon is a sort of Apocalyptic trigger that..."

"Bullshit," Kevin said. "The war is over. If Babylon was there, it's gone now."

"It's there," Fat said. "The war is over, yes, but Babylon survived. In fact, *it won*."

"It won," Kevin echoed. He turned to David. "Call 911. If I'm sitting here talking to myself, I need a doctor, fast. If you see and hear who I'm talking to, you can ride in the ambulance with me. We can sell our story to the Enquirer to pay for the treatment...And whoever doused us dies."

"Look," Fat said, "I can't explain it beyond saying that one day I'm hopping islands in 1982 Micronesia, and blink, just like that, I wake up in a temple in 1991 Iraq, sweating under a fourteen year old prostitute who's chanting in Arabic and receiving visions while banging my lights out…"

"My sympathies," I said.

Kevin and David both looked at me, shocked again, as if suddenly remembering my presence. I could see no point in staying out of the conversation any longer. I'd touched nothing but my own Jim Beam supply the night before; I knew this was not a hallucination, at least not a conventional one.

"I read about the reconstruction a few years ago," I continued. "The excavation site was just outside Baghdad. If you were there, you were in the heart of the bombing."

"That's true," Fat said. "I was there. But Babylon was protected."

"From the Coalition?"

"Yes," Fat answered, then after a pause he added, "And from Hussein."

As morning stretched to afternoon, the details, or at least Horselover Fat's version of the details, became clear:

The Iraqi restoration teams had awakened something slumbering deep beneath the Persian sands. The teams vanished. Soldiers sent to investigate also vanished. The Republican Guard set up camp, encircling the site. But they, too, soon vanished, one by one - into, it was discovered, the Great City, which had miraculously billowed into full life before them, sometimes there, sometimes not, wavering like a grand mirage over the steaming sand. Those who remained outside could see the others within, joining the ceremonies, sacrificing, being sacrificed, sweating under the young temple prostitutes as they screamed out their visions. They could hear the

endless chanting, even during the less and less frequent periods when the City could not be seen.

Frantic calls were made, calls for help. George Bush - an Episcopalian - consulted Billy Graham – an Evangelical - about End Time Signs. A coalition of more than thirty countries was put together to break the chain of Signs before the next could be triggered, to avert Apocalypse by bombing the City of Evil back to prehistoric dust. A cover story was carefully constructed for the Press, complete with atrocity reports, spectacular battle footage, and last ditch efforts for "peace."

They bombed round the clock for weeks. With no effect. With each salvo, the City winked briefly out of existence, to reappear in all its glory the moment the shelling stopped.

Their target could not be destroyed, could not even be damaged. A quick ground war was staged for the Press, and the troops were pulled back to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. A few remained in Iraq in case something changed, but were kept far to the South to prevent their being seduced into joining the Enemy.

Now pestilence was spreading in widening circles through the land. New cover stories were being prepared, building on the old ones. Now, civil war...

"Hussein's restoration teams triggered a time dysfunction," Fat said. "Something they did there allowed Babylon to enter our time in its true form."

David took his seat again at the table. As Fat was laying out his story, the little kitchen had gradually grown dim. Dark clouds had collected overhead, cutting off the warm sunlight. A thick, sheeting rain now beat against the roof and walls. David had left the table to move swiftly through the little apartment, closing windows, switching on lights. He'd paused in the living room long enough to put a record on the turn-table - Wagner's *The Valkyries*, recorded at the Bayreuth Festival of 1952. "Rain Music," he called it.

"Babylon," Fat continued vehemently, "cannot be destroyed in 1991, because it did not exist, materially, in, say, 539 B.C. It exists outside of time, outside the material universe. It's an Archetypal

Form that was imprisoned in material reality until God saw fit to allow its return and begin the Apocalyptic countdown..."

"Babylon survived the fall of 539," David said. "Under Alexander, the historical city..."

"There is no *'historical city'*," Fat cut in. "Babylon is an idea, a spirit of evil and destruction that was encased in material form until the day of its Apocalyptic release, of its rebirth into pure, malevolent Spirit. Over the centuries, many conquerors, including Alexander, have tapped its sleeping power to serve their own desires. They built cities, whole empires in its name - Babylon, Alexandria, Rome, the Third Reich - But the real Babylon..."

"So you're saying Hussein is Hitler," Kevin said. "*Deedle deedle queep*. You should work for Washington..."

"Damn it, Kevin!" Fat shouted. "Hussein's part of the Coalition! They threw everything short of nukes at that thing and it didn't even flinch! They blew those Kuwaiti wells hoping to slow it down a little, confuse it. But it's waking up for real this time. Do you get it? This is not a drill! Babylon is back and there's nobody at the wheel!"

Silence. Fat and Kevin staring bullets across the table. Sweat on David's forehead.

"The oil," I said.

Again, Kevin and David looked at me, surprise on their faces. It was as though I was somehow fading in and out of their memories, only noticed when I spoke, forgotten again as soon as they looked away.

"What you're saying," I continued, speaking to Fat but raising my voice in hopes of holding Kevin and David's attention, "is that the oil is alive. That it's been sleeping under that desert for... however long... That it's..."

"... the material form of Babylon," Fat finished for me. "And we've been exporting it all over the world for a century. Building our lives on it. Fueling our cars, our power plants. Fertilizing our food with it, taking it into our bodies. And it's waking up now, Spiritualizing, taking on its true malevolent form. All around the world."

David pushed away from the table. "I take it back," he said, his face flushed. "You haven't changed a bit. You're as loony as you ever were. First of all. God does not *allow* Apocalypse. He saves us from it."

"You've been watching too many Televangelists," Fat said. "Read your Bible."

"And second," Kevin said, calm again, a tight smile on his lips, "You don't exist, Fat. You almost had us again, old buddy, but not this time. Not this time."

He turned to David.

"C'mon," he said. "Let's get on the horn and find out who doused us last night. We'll make like we're not pissed off, like we had a great trip. Then we'll drive over and blow whoever did its fucking brains out."

They stood, simultaneously, and disappeared together into the living room.

"Good luck," Fat called after them, "with that driving over stuff! Cars use oil! You'll never get out of the driveway!

*"Shit,"* I said.

I was alone at the table with Horselover Fat. But I could still see Kevin and David. The wall between us had become transparent, moving in slow, misty waves in front of me. I could see them in there, squabbling over the receiver, dialing. I could hear their voices, their faked laughter as they grilled each answering party in turn, as they sought out their culprit, the scapegoat to be sacrificed in the name of their anger and confusion. Their words seemed to blend into a rhythmic, scatological chant.

"We die because we are stupid," Fat said, shrugging his shoulders. "I hope Kevin's right again. That I don't exist." He downed the last of his coffee and stood. "Nonexistence would come in very handy during the Tribulation. Less to contend with if I'm to find the Savior before the shit really hits the fan."

I touched Fat's arm, gripping his shirt-cuff, testing his corporeality. He smiled.

"One thing, Fat, before you leave," I said. "You claim you were in Babylon. If all those Iraqis got sucked in there to stay, how did you get out?"

Fat's smile vanished. He scratched his balding scalp. The smile slowly returned.

"I just walked out," he said. "Any of them could have if they'd wanted to. There was no barrier or anything. But that's the whole point. They didn't want to. They liked it there."

He shrugged his shoulders again, freeing his arm from my grip.

"It was nice meeting you."

He left.

"Shit," I said again.

I wiped at beads of sweat now pooling on my forehead. I turned back toward the living room, toward the transparent, wavering wall, toward the stereo, struggling to hear over the rising chant, suddenly hungry for the reassuring strains of Wagner's heroic opera.

It had stopped.

# The Last Dinosaur

"*Art schmart*, Brad. No offense, but when was the last time you *sold* anything?"

Weasels, Brad thought. You're all weasels. He fixed what he hoped was a superior, unconcerned gaze on the wiry boy sitting before him. The boy fidgeted, looked away. Brad smiled thinly.

"I stay in print," he said.

But now he noticed that the boy hadn't turned away in shame; he'd turned to his cronies for support. He'd gotten it. All around the crowded Pro-Party, faces nodded around sly smiles, young authors chuckled behind raised cans of fashionable *Say-No Cola*. Only one face, a pale girl with brown curls tumbling around her birdlike features, looked on with anything close to sympathy. Brad gave a curt nod. He'd have to work his way in that direction, check her out.

"Sure, Brad, no offense." The boy paused, letting his condescending tone rattle around the room, echo back from nodding faces. "But realistically, you work for nothing. Gratis. No publisher would *buy* your stuff anymore. It's *imperfect*."

"It's real," Brad shot back.

This game annoyed him. Every convention, the same stupid argument. The same stupid attacks from wet-nosed children riding their fifteen minutes of fame on the Prose-Perfect wave. How could he ever convince them that computer-written stories were a sham? That stories sweated over by a real human writer were superior? That no matter how clever your ideas, to let some machine do the real work…

He let his eyes move slowly over the sea of young faces surrounding him. Up-and-comers. Major novelists. The room was gleaming with science fiction's brightest stars… And not one of

them over thirty. There was probably not a person in the room who'd ever even read a man-produced story. That was all before their time.

He focused again on the wiry pup, let the stare sink slowly in.

"They teach my work in universities all over the world. You won't survive into next week."

The pup barked. His laughter came back reinforced by the crowd.

"Sure, they teach your work, Brad." A thin smile played connect-the-dots between pimple scars on his face. "In the Ancient History Department."

The room laughed out loud. Brad sipped his Scotch and pretended not to notice. He lit a cigarette, drew a heavy first drag, then blew a thick column of smoke directly into his attacker's face.

The boy coughed. Brad smiled. He pulled himself up to sit tall and cross-legged at the center of the now widening circle of faces. They were moving away, angry now. They didn't like cigarette smoke; they weren't real authors at all… He leaned in close to the pup's frowning face.

"I can't even read the crap you people turn out," he growled. "It's like reading Mylanta. So smooth and bland it makes me sick."

"And yours reads like you ate gravel for breakfast and crapped it out on the page."

"What have you read, Junior? Of mine?"

The pup refused to look away. But he did cough again; that was something.

"Nothing, Old Man. Why should I?"

Brad leaned back again, away from the angry young face. He sipped his drink. He'd caught a whiff of genuine fear behind the pup's challenge, a defensiveness that was more than arrogance. The others had heard it, too. They were frowning now at the boy as though he'd revealed some secret, broken some dark cultic oath.

Brad let his eyes drift back to the dark-haired girl by the window. She was watching him, intense, her arms tight across her chest as if trying to hold herself separate from the mocking crowd, to let him know she wanted no part of their game; in a room packed with people, she stood alone.

Brad smiled and nodded a quick *Come on*. The he turned and scanned the room for an ashtray. There wasn't one.

* * *

Her name was Melissa. She was, of course, a published author; her first story had come out when she was sixteen. Two years before. Brad considered checking her driver's license before he took it any further, but decided it was worth the risk. The girl was different. She sat on the bed, her thin legs crossed at the knee, smoking the cigarette he'd offered in jest. He liked her already.

"So, what do you want with an old codger like me?" He poured two drinks—Scotch, neat—and handed one over. She accepted it, grimaced at the smell, then sipped it anyway. *Good for her.* Brad sat beside her on the bed, ran a slow finger over the narrow strip of thigh peeking out from under her skirt. "I saw your Prose-Perfect laptop on the counter. I take it you're in the Writer's Workshop?"

"Mr. Peterson…" She touched his roving hand as if to brush it away, but finished by gripping it tightly, holding on.

"Brad."

She smiled. "Brad," she echoed, the tiniest fraction of a quaver in her voice. "They really are afraid of you, you know. They know in their hearts what impostors they are. They have to hide from that. To survive. You don't let them hide."

He returned her smile. "You're not hiding. I'm glad. You seem pretty real to me."

"I'm an impostor, too. In my first year of writing…"

"Don't put yourself down," he interrupted, a bit too gallant, too eager. He checked his tone. "You've been writing two years with Prose-Perfect, Melissa. Which means you've got—what? Ten? Twenty stories in print?" A couple of novels, maybe? Not bad…"

The girl looked away. "Thirty-five stories, six novels," she said softly. "All in my first year. I hate them all. They're so… *perfect*." She spat the word like warm Mylanta, then faced him, smiling again. "But I haven't sold much this past year. I've been reading, mostly. Your books."

"My books? Really?" A rush of genuine pride swept through his own practiced defensiveness. It felt good.

"You don't know me, Brad," the girl continued, suddenly intense. "But I know you. I've studied your work. It's wonderful. It's no accident that we met. I came to this convention specifically to meet you."

"Really?" His smile spread into a wide grin. He hadn't heard that one in a long, long time. He watched the girl taking tiny puffs from the cigarette, not inhaling. She'd learn.

"I have something to show you," she said.

She slid off the bed, crouched before him, her face almost in his crotch. Brad finished his drink in one swallow, tilting his head all the way back. When he looked again, she was sitting on the bed beside him, a briefcase she'd pulled from underneath resting in her lap. She popped the locks.

"Hey…," Brad said, the words slurring, going soft. "Would you look at that?" He ran his hand down her slender arm, till their fingers intertwined over the cover of a tattered book inside the briefcase. They pulled it out together, exchanged smiles. *"The First Dinosaur."* A faint whistle. "I don't even own a copy of this. Jesus. What was that, 2006?"

"'2004," she said, letting him take the book, move away with it toward the light. "Twenty-five years and it's still brilliant, Brad. It has stylistic problems, sure, but the idea is brilliant. The way you carry it through. It's genuinely moving."

She slid close to him again, joined him in examining the book under the lamp's yellow glow.

"No one but you could have written this," she said, her voice suddenly thick with emotion. "There's so much of you in it. Your hopes, your fears, the way you feel." She touched his hand. "I fell in love with you reading this, Brad. I'm a writer because of this book."

He offered it back, his cheeks burning. She stopped him, wrapped her small hands around his, around the book.

"Keep it." She laughed, tiny bells in a spring breeze. "I've got it memorized. I know it better than you do."

Their eyes met, held. Then she looked quickly away. Her eyes dropped back to the open briefcase. She hesitated.

"There's more."

It took him a moment to focus on the neat manuscript she now held out to him. She had to lay it in his lap, surrender it, before he could clearly make out the title:

**The Last Dinosaur**

**By Melissa Jackson and Brad Peterson**

"I don't remember…" Then it clicked, like glasses falling into place on his nose. He glanced involuntarily toward the little computer on the counter, then back to the stack of white papers in his lap. "Oh, Christ, Melissa. You didn't…"

"Please, Brad. Just read it. For me." She touched his hand again, twisted her slender fingers through his. A gentle squeeze. "My agent's already found a publisher, if you'll agree." A soft smile. "It's you, Brad. It's us. I've studied you, the way you think, the way you feel, how you see the world, what matters to you. I know you better than you know yourself. Please. Don't say I'm wrong till you've read it."

He met her eyes again, saw himself reflected back from her tear-dampened irises. So blue, so young… He looked back to the manuscript.

"Another drink?"

* * *

Tears hovered in his own eyes by the third page, traced slow lines down his cheeks. It was the most beautiful piece of writing he'd ever read. Already the characters were fully alive, fully human. The dialog sparkled and flowed. Page after page poured through him like warm, healing water. The frail truth of his human existence was laid bare by the poor Last Dinosaur's plight, his struggle to survive against all odds, his tragic failure. Oh, how he wanted to

become a bird, to fly away over the encroaching ice… But that was for the young. The species would survive, would evolve to meet the challenge, but he, the lone, unchangeable adult, would not. Evolution doesn't work that way.

Brad wept freely as he read on, entranced by the sparkling prose, swept away, oblivious to the girl on the floor at his feet, her knees pulled tight under her chin, watching him. But as he turned the last page—moments, hours, maybe days later; he couldn't tell—he felt her eyes caressing him, nudging him to speak, to make some pronouncement. He held out his glass for yet another refill.

"I've never read anything like it," he said as the girl snatched up his glass and moved off toward the counter, toward the Prose-Perfect laptop. He watched her fill his glass, and then one for herself. Her hand trembled as she passed the Scotch over. She plopped down on the bed beside him.

"What does that mean, Brad?" She held up a small hand to shush him, downed her drink in one swallow. The hand fell away. "Okay," she said. "Tell me."

"It's beautiful, Melissa." He glanced bitterly again toward the counter. "Must be one helluva program you're using…"

The girl flinched and looked away. He was immediately sorry, but he just couldn't reconcile the powerful novel, the emotions it had stirred in him, with the sight of its mechanical source. Every Prose-Perfect story he'd ever read had been bland, lifeless, stamped from the same two-dimensional mold. But this…

It scared him. He hated it.

"Brad?"

"What do you expect me to say?" he almost shouted, his defenses crashing again into place. "You download me into some machine, and it out-writes me? How am I supposed to feel about that?"

"Brad…"

He pushed the manuscript aside, pulled her hands together, held them tight.

"Don't get me wrong. It's good. It's better than good. That's my problem, see?" He forced a soft laugh, met her eyes. "Not only does

your machine out-write me by a million to one, but it kills me off in the final chapter…"

"Kills you off? What?"

"I'm obviously the dinosaur, Melissa. He dies in the end."

"No he doesn't." She reached for the manuscript, set it back in his lap. "Where do you get that? Show me."

"Okay, hold on…" He pulled the bottom page from the stack and held it for a long moment under the lamp. Then he offered it to her, his finger marking the final paragraph. "There. Read that."

She read it over silently, paused, read it again. She looked up.

"No, Brad, you're wrong. Whether he dies or manages to evolve is left open, for the reader to decide."

"Melissa, he sinks in a tar-pit."

"He walks off toward the tar-pits. I never say he falls in. Besides, I established in Chapter Six that certain tar-pits have transformative powers that…"

"You established that as a superstition, a legend. It's too weak a hope to hang an ending on. The way it's written here…"

The girl was staring at him in silence. He felt her eyes nudging him to complete the thought, to ferret out some hidden connection. He looked to the counter, to the Prose Perfect laptop, then focused again on the page in his hands, reread that vague final paragraph. A circuit in his mind slowly closed: She'd studied his work, come especially to meet him, put his name on the manuscript…

He smiled. "You wrote this. Yourself."

"Yes."

She took the page from his hand, gathered the rest of the manuscript, and dropped the whole thing into the briefcase. She snapped the locks closed.

"I'll rewrite the last chapter before it goes to the publisher. Or I can take your name off it, if you'd prefer."

She moved to shove the briefcase under the bed, out of sight. Brad stopped her, pulled her to him.

"Keep them both. Don't change a thing. I love it."

She let the briefcase drop to the floor, in the open, in sight. She touched his hand and smiled.

"I knew you'd say that."

* * *

The sex wasn't perfect, but it was good. So good that, in several moments throughout the night, Brad found himself floating, rising on invisible winds, and watching the little room sink away through a vision of clouds and feathers and clear blue skies.

# Virgil's Reason (An Alternate Inferno)

*Circle V: The Angry and the Sullen*

Her forehead hit the refrigerator, and she felt her eyes crossing. She collapsed onto the tile, clutching the wound. There was blood.

"Damn it, Bobby," she said, her voice a hoarse whisper. "Just stop it. Please."

She turned and sat with her back against the refrigerator door. The man towered over her, his cheeks flushed with rage. His hands worked furiously at the air before him, opening and closing spasmodically. He seemed to be clutching at invisible objects, breaking them, reaching for more.

"Damn me?" he shouted, stepping close. "Damn you, girl!"

His foot shot out, catching her in the jaw. She reeled, thrown again to the floor. Her chin cracked hard against the tile and her mouth filled with blood.

"Please...," she managed, "I didn't do anything... It was an accident..."

She clenched her teeth against a rising nausea and pulled herself across the floor. A wooden kitchen chair stood away from the table and she put it between them, crouching behind it, leaning heavily.

The man crossed to her; he was smiling now. He sat down, straddling the chair, his arms folded across its back.

"What's that you said, Baby?" He reached out to stroke her blood-matted hair. "You say you gonna get a job? Pay for it all yourself?"

"Sure, Bobby, whatever you say... I'll get a job and..."

The hand in her hair closed into a fist. He pulled her face close to his, his free hand snaking to her throat.

"Do you have any idea what it's gonna cost to fix that car? Do you?"

She tried to shake her head *No*, but when she moved, his grip on her throat tightened. Her eyes began to bulge, pushed forward by the trapped blood.

"And don't flash those sweet puppy dogs at me, Baby," he crooned, "'cause they won't help you. I'm gonna be working eighty hours a week to pay for what you done, so don't think you're not gonna pay..."

He released her hair and raised his fist to strike. The blow threw her free of his choke-hold and sent her sprawling across the floor, gulping for air.

"That's you first installment," he said, suddenly standing beside her. "And here comes the interest."

His booted foot shot out again, this time catching her in the ribs. She flew back. A sharp crack sounded as her head connected with the edge of the sink. She crumbled to the floor, her body numb.

"What'sa matter, Baby? Don't like your new job?"

She heard his words, but it no longer mattered. A black pit lay open before her and she was already falling into it. It was already over.

* * *

"We've finished the scan of this sector, Sir. She's gone." Virgil returned the tiny radio to its clip on his belt. He waited in silence for the Archon to react to the news.

The angel before him was tall and narrow. His softly glowing robes clung tightly to his thin frame, giving him the appearance of a stick of light, a self-contained beam projected into the unfriendly environment of the Fifth Circle. His golden hair hung loose past his shoulders, unaffected by the chill wind that bent the waist-high grass around him, that whipped the foul waters of the marsh into foam. His birdlike features were pinched with concentration as he weighed Virgil's report against the twisted, lifeless body at his feet.

"She's escaped, then. Start a scan of Level Four. She'll appear there soon."

"At once, Archon."

Virgil again raised the transceiver to give the order. He clipped the radio to his belt, then turned to follow the angel up the narrow path that led away from the Pool.

"What you're saying isn't possible," he said, his cheeks puffing as he hurried to close the space between them. "Escape, I mean. No one has escaped from Hell since you sealed the Gate against The Invader, since he kidnapped Rebecca and stole your Jews from Limbo."

The tangled underbrush whipped painfully against Virgil's legs as he tore through it, fighting to match the Archon's steady pace. The cold wind sang mournfully in his ears, drowning out the cries of the Damned who called him to return, to show mercy.

"To escape from one's Circle is not to escape from Hell," the angel answered. He stopped to fix Virgil with a dark, penetrating gaze.

The Archon's eyes were tiny points of shadow set deep into his luminous face. The intensity of their focus rooted Virgil to the path. He lowered his head apologetically.

"The Law of Retribution is a masterpiece, a work of art," the angel said. "It has cradled you mortals since the dawn of Creation, protected you from your weakness, guaranteed your place in the Divine Plan. But art demands symmetry, Virgil. In order to function, the Law must be internally balanced. It must provide at least a minor clause of Compensation.

He raised a thin, glowing arm toward the marsh behind them, toward the battered form washed up on its shore.

"To have found the loophole the Law provides proves she's clever," he continued. "To make use of it, though, she'll have to prove much more than cleverness. The Law provides for the possibility of escape, yes, but Grace through Retribution is no easy road. The clause requires her to back out, level by level, to suffer the fruits of each Circle in turn before passing on to the next. But she'll never survive. The Law provides for that as well."

The angel turned and started again up the path. Virgil followed in silence, the hostile wind cutting painfully through his tunic.

"Yes, a rare few have tried to experience their way out before," the Archon added as they hurried away. "But none have reached the Vestibule. With each level, the gravity of sin lessens, and it becomes harder and harder to die. It becomes increasingly difficult to remain innocent, a faultless victim of the crimes which define the Circle. She'll make a mistake, Virgil, and then we'll have her."

They followed the path as it angled right and began a steep incline. The Thrashing Pool disappeared behind them. The wailing wind stopped short as if suddenly sealed off behind an invisible barrier.

They had entered the Fourth Circle.

## *Circle IV: The Avaricious and the Prodigal*

The wooden doorframe splintered as the door pushed free of its moorings. The heavy door flew inward, crashing to a stop against the desk. A sheaf of papers exploded into the air as a startled cat dove away from the desk, hit the ground, and disappeared into the hallway, rushing between the legs of the dark figure that hovered there.

The shadow entered the room slowly, taking gradual shape under the soft moonlight that streamed through the open bedroom window.

"I didn't wake you up, did I?"

The man stood at the foot of the bed, surveying the frightened couple who lay before him. The girl was naked, her pale limbs wrapped tight around the darker, Puerto Rican boy. The boy was sitting up now, scrambling to pull covers over their bodies, to protect his woman from the cold gaze of the intruder.

"What you want?" the boy said, his voice burning with hatred. "Where you get off busting into my house, tearing things up..."

"I came for the money, Tony." A semiautomatic rifle glinted in the moonlight as the intruder raised it level with the boy's chest. "You promised it by Tuesday, Tony. Where you been?"

"I've been on the streets, Mr. Vitali," Tony answered, the angry bravado now gone from his voice, "Using your money to make a deal. There's a big payoff coming. I just need a few more days..."

"You're stupid, Tony," the man interrupted. He shook his head in mock-disbelief. "You lied to me when you borrowed my money, and you're lying to me now. I checked your deal, Tony. It don't exist. All you done with my money was buy two tickets to Brazil."

The man leaned forward and put a hand on the sheet, feeling for the girl's soft leg. She tried to jerk away, but her foot was caught, twisted in the material. He gripped her shin and forced the leg still. He pressed the nose of the gun against the bridge of her foot, then looked back to the boy.

"Two tickets, Tony?" He nodded toward the frightened girl and smiled. "Your own life ain't worth shit, and I know you know it. But maybe she matters to you, eh? Where's my money?"

"Don't do it, Man. Don't hurt her. She's got nothing to do with this. Give me a couple of days..."

The foot exploded as bullets poured into it, tearing through the mattress, piercing the floor. The girl screamed and flung herself on the intruder, her sharp nails digging deep into his neck. He threw her back onto the bed where she curled up, a broken doll, clutching Tony's bare chest, screaming.

"Shit!" Tony shouted. He threw himself over the girl and twisted the sheet frantically around the stump. The girl bit his side, then went limp, lost in shock.

"You're next, Tony," the man said. His voice was shaking now, but his hand remained steady as he raised the gun. "The money?"

"All right!" Tony pushed the unconscious girl aside and scrambled over to a chest of drawers against the far wall. He reached out to open the top drawer.

"Wait," the man said. "Get back on the bed."

Tony froze, the drawer in his hands. He stepped slowly away, following the direction of the gesturing pistol. He sat on the edge of the bed, his face in his hands. He began to cry.

The man circled around the weeping boy without lowering the gun. He opened the drawer to find a briefcase and a thirty-eight caliber revolver.

"You are so stupid, Tony," he said, his voice again steady. "Did you really think I wouldn't watch you? That you wouldn't get caught?"

He raked the bureau clean with an angry thrust, sending a shower of loose change and trinkets clattering to the floor. He pulled out the briefcase and set it into the cleared space. He popped the locks.

"Take the money and get out," Tony said. He turned away, focusing on the girl. The makeshift tourniquet had slipped. Blood was again flowing from the wound, pooling on the mattress.

"Where's the rest of it, Tony?" the man said. He looked from the briefcase to the boy and back again.

"What *rest of it?*" Tony asked without turning, his voice incredulous. "It's all there."

"I mean the interest. You knew the terms when you borrowed it."

Tony spun towards the man. He stood and slowly advance until the gun lay pressed against his forehead. Sweat rolled across the barrel, dripping down to touch the man's fingers.

"Fuck you," Tony rasped. "You've got all you're ever gonna get from me."

His eyes met the man's pitiless gaze. He held, counting the seconds: *one... two... three...*

His nerve failed. He turned and walked back to the bed, defeated. He curled up beside the injured girl, his back to the man.

"Just get out of here," he said. "Please. Just leave us alone."

"You got it, Shitball." The man snapped the briefcase closed and carried it to the doorway. He paused, turned back. "Hey, Tony?"

"What." The boy was crying again.

"Catch."

A rain of bullets traced a slow arc across the room, cutting a line through the bed. The young bodies thrashed against the mattress, then blended, a single, fleshy lump. The bed collapsed, its supports halved by the concentrated fire.

The gun's barrel was a glowing point in the darkness, marking the man's trail as he retreated through the shadowy hallway.

* * *

"There," the angel said, pointing.

They were standing on the edge of the Great Quarry. A desert of granite stretched out before them, its angry reds and browns glowing under a pitiless, stationary sun.

The trail had bottomed out on the lip of an immense cavity that seemed scooped whole from the desert's burning floor. Below, Virgil could make out two lines of boulders moving slowly together, meeting at the center of the circular pit. When the rocks clashed, there was an angry shout, a harsh cry of indignation, insults and threats. The shouting continued as the boulders began to move, inexorably, apart.

"No, Virgil, there. To the side."

Virgil followed the angel's pointing finger with his eyes, squinting hard against the glare that rose off the scorched rock floor. He could make out nothing smaller than the slowly separating boulders.

"Come on," the angel said. He disappeared over the lip.

Virgil crept forward and peered, cautiously, over the edge. An impossibly steep stairway was cut into the stone wall, dropping away to meet the hard floor of the Quarry at an almost perfect right angle. The Archon was already far below, moving quickly along the treacherous path.

Virgil took a deep breath and followed. He scooted over the edge, found the first precarious step with his toes. He had to face the stone wall, gripping the steps above him for purchase, descending the narrow stair like a ladder.

"This way," the angel said as Virgil, his legs shaking, stumbled over the last steps to land in a heap on the hard ground. "Behind those rocks."

The path ahead was obscured by a huge, conical spire of red granite. It towered overhead, its wide base gradually refining to a tiny spearpoint in the sky. A gigantic rounded boulder hung balanced on the spire's narrow tip. It rocked gently in the occasional scorching breeze, threatening at any moment to forget its station and join its smaller companions in the arena.

Virgil followed the angel into the seductively shaded area at the spire's base. He made his way slowly, carefully navigating the jagged outcroppings that marked the end of the path. When he reached the far side, he found the Archon waiting.

"She made it out," the angel said. "Look."

A large amorphous object, the remains of a shattered bed, lay nestled among the rocks to the right of where the path started again. A thin trail of blood traced a snaking line from the bed to the lower, even ground of the path. A thick puddle was already collecting at the glowing angel's feet.

Virgil turned from the sight, taking a few abortive steps ahead along the path. He stopped, breathing heavily. The hot, dry air filled his lungs, pushing back the nausea that threatened to drag him to the ground.

With his back to the angel, his voice tinned with controlled effort, he said, "Shall I start the scan of Level Three?"

"At once," the angel answered. He was already moving swiftly past the shaking man, hurrying up the trail that led around and out of the quarry. "And we'll have to increase our pace if we expect to catch her there as she enters. She's not stopping to rest, so neither can we."

## *Circle III: The Gluttons*

Luthor trapped the steering wheel in the folds of his wide belly. He raised the beer can, letting his head fall back until he was

looking at the dirty fabric of the car's ceiling. The can emptied and he rocked his head forward, a great swallow forcing the beer down. He let out a long, satisfied belch as he crushed the can and tossed it behind him. It clattered against the window, then settled into the mound of empty cans and fast food wrappers that already overflowed the back seat.

"I need music," he said, his speech slurring. "And another beer."

He flicked on the radio and twisted the tuning dial until the car was filled with the soulful twang of steel guitar. He leaned back, letting the sounds wash over him. He smoothed his thinning, sweat-soaked hair with one large hand.

"Yep," he said through a deep, drunken sigh. "That's what I needed, all right."

He turned to the passenger seat for another beer. The steering wheel was pressed tightly into his round stomach and, as he moved, the wheel moved with him. The car swerved onto the shoulder of the dark highway.

"Well, shit."

He took the wheel in both hands and jerked the car back into the empty lane. He wrapped one thick arm securely through the wheel, then groped again for the six pack. He twisted a can free of the plastic ring, popped it open, and took a long swig.

His attention was suddenly snared by a dark swirl of motion ahead.

"What'sat?" he mumbled.

He angled toward it. The beam of his headlights revealed a brown sedan on the highway's edge. A woman stood beside the car, waving frantically.

"Must'a blown a tire..."

He dropped his beer into a holder in the door and tried to focus on the waving form. It seemed to bounce in and out of his vision, doubling and receding, blurring when he looked to the parked car, the car blurring when he focused on the woman.

"Guess I better stop..."

As he neared the stranded woman, he jerked the wheel to the right, aiming for the space behind the sedan. The car heaved, tires

screeching, the sharp motion slamming his body against the door. His foot missed the brake and landed instead on the accelerator.

Time slowed. In the bright circle thrown by his headlights, Luthor watched his bumper bite deeply into the sedan's side. The woman's legs came off, instantly crushed out of sight. Her severed torso hit his windshield and their eyes met, briefly exchanging wide stares of horror and surprise before she continued on, bouncing onto and over the top of his car to land with a dull clap on the pavement behind.

* * *

Virgil raised his hood and cinched the cord tightly under his chin, leaving only his round face exposed to the cold, unceasing rain. The driving hailstones that beat against his back and head seemed to be avoiding the spot where the angel stood, so Virgil moved away from the metal origami of the interwoven cars and crossed to stand beside him. He kept his eyes focused on the gray distance, allowing the steady barking that echoed through the valley and the sour stench rising from the soft ground to overwhelm his senses, to pull them, mercifully, away from the broken form at his feet.

"She's good," the angel said. "She has a rare determination, this one. I admire her stamina."

He knelt beside the partial body and prodded it gently with his fingertips. He raised the dampened fingers to his nose, sniffing the blood; it was fresh.

"But she can't be that good," he continued, his voice sharp. "There are limits to how much Punishment a mortal soul can endure. The Law is specifically designed to defeat those limits. The progress she's made is simply not possible, unless..."

He reached to a patch of snow on the stinking ground and worked the dark slush slowly between his hands, washing away the still-warm blood. His eyes followed the rhythmic motion with enormous concentration, as though expecting his long fingers to pry some secret from the murky crystals.

"Of course, Virgil," he said finally, allowing his thoughts to take shape in the bitter air, adding them to the slow weave of his hands. "She's being helped. It's the only way."

He dropped the reddened snow and stood, eyes raised to the gray expanse of the sky.

"Let's go, Virgil. The Invader's back, I'm sure of it. I can sense his hand behind all of this. He's trying to beat us with our own Law, strengthening her, advising her, calling her to Him with his lies and false promises. If she makes it to the Gate, we're doomed."

"But the Gate is sealed..." Virgil stopped short as the angel turned and fixed him in a burning gaze.

"It won't be if she reaches it, you fool! If she reaches the Vestibule, if she fulfills that accursed clause, the Gate will open for her. It has to by Law."

The Archon spun away and started up the path.

Virgil remained motionless, watching as the angel moved swiftly away. The narrow form grew smaller, finally blurring as it advanced into the sheeting rain.

He looked away, focusing first on the twisted wreckage to his left, and then, for the first time, on the mangled body at his feet. It trembled pitifully in the thick mud, pelted into motion by the dense hail that had again begun to fall.

He folded his hands into a protective visor and looked up, slowly scanning the bleak sky. Dark clouds boiled on the horizon, sweeping rapidly forward as they dispensed their payload of Divine Wrath on the Damned of the Third Circle.

"Is it better where you are, Rebecca?" he said to the sky. "Are you happy there?"

The sky answered with a peal of thunder that shook the ground beneath him. The rain, impossibly, poured down with even greater fury. It forced his head down, forced his eyes back to the woman's broken body.

"Why?" he demanded of the now spiritless corpse. "I have to understand! Why are you doing this? Can a thief be such a good master? Can you admire such treachery?"

He was answered again by thunder that crashed and echoed into the distance. He turned away.

*"Rebecca..."*

He dropped his hands into the single wide pocket of his tunic and crossed over to the path. He began to walk, head bowed, toward the distant entrance to Level Two.

## *Circle II: The Lustful*

The sound of creaking hinges.

"Who's there?"

Silence.

She paused in her work, allowing the heavy brush to rest against the horse's gleaming side. The horse shifted uneasily as she turned to face the stable door.

"Who is it? Who's there?"

"It's me. Jake."

The voice was disembodied in the darkness. A hulking silhouette gradually appeared, becoming a man as it stepped into the small circle of the oil lamp's shifting glow.

The girl turned back to the horse. She renewed her long brush-strokes, smoothing the soft ebony hide, calming the horse with a gentle scratch behind the ears.

"What you want, Jake," she said. Her back stiffened. "You got work for me in the house?"

"No," he said quietly. "I came to watch you work. Here."

He moved through the circle of light thrown by the lamp and took a seat on a bale of straw at the circle's periphery. He leaned forward, his forearms braced on his thighs, his big hands folded before him. When he spoke again his voice was low, almost a whisper.

"I been watching you for a long time. I been watching you every day."

The brush slowed against the horse's side, then exploded in a brisk staccato. The animal pulled away, frightened by the unfamiliar touch.

"I seen you watching me, Jake," she said coldly. "I felt your eyes on me."

The crackle of footsteps on straw.

"Then you been watching me, too?"

"No."

The brush stopped as a meaty hand gripped her wrist. Another wrapped tightly around her hip.

"I knew it," he said, burning her cheek with his whiskeyed breath. "I knew you loved me, too. I seen you looking back, wanting me..."

His body pressed against her as the hand moved up, roughly cupping her breast. She felt his lips caress her neck. Bourbon and horse sweat mixed in her nostrils, choking her. She twisted, frantically, free.

"Don't you ever touch me like that again," she said, her voice an angry hiss. "I ain't no woman to you, Jake Ramsey. I your daddy's property just like that old horse there. You wanna bed down with somebody tonight, you go bed down with her."

The stable suddenly shifted and she was staring into the high rafters, her back against the hard floor. The man was kneeling beside her, wiping blood from her mouth with a grimy handkerchief.

"And don't you ever talk to me like that again," he was saying from somewhere amidst the spinning wood beams. "A man offers you his love, you show him respect."

She rolled away and sat up, facing the man. Her hand moved to her tender lip, then to her hair. She pulled at the tangled straw and looked away in silence, staring into the lamp's tiny flame.

"I'm sorry I had to hit you," he said, his words now soft, wooing. "And I know you're sorry, too, for what you said. Ain't no way for new lovers to behave, no way at all."

She looked now into his wet, red eyes, his smiling face glowing yellow in the flickering light.

"This ain't love," she said flatly. "Love takes two."

He stood and circled behind her. He kneeled close, grip-ping her shoulders.

"That's right," he said. "Two. You and me makes two."

He pushed her slowly forward, his weight crushing her chest and stomach to the floor.

"No, Jake... Don't... Please..."

"Hush now," he said.

She fought for breath as he raised himself up, his forearm braced against her shoulder blades. The soft clink of a loosening belt. The momentary cold of her thin dress being raised. The sickening heat of flesh against flesh as he took her from behind.

He finished and rolled away, spent. Her breath returned and she began to cry, curling her knees painfully to her chest, pushing blindly at the tattered fabric of her dress, covering herself, covering the blood stained straw beneath her.

He stood, quickly fastened his clothing, then sat again beside her. He stared off into the darkness outside the lamp's domain, his eyes filled with confusion, then rage, then, finally, resolve. The wooing kindness vanished from his voice.

"You're right," he said. "You don't love me."

He rocked gently back and forth, his arms wrapped around his shins, his head resting on his knees.

"No," he continued, still reasoning more with the darkness than with the girl shivering beside him, "Just listen to you blubber. You don't love me at all. Now I got myself a problem."

He stood and disappeared from the circle of light. When he returned, he carried a thick board, the bolt from the stable door.

"Stand up," he said.

The girl remained on the floor, weeping.

"Stand up!"

She pulled herself weakly up, balanced for a moment on hands and knees, then slowly stood. She faced him, her puffy eyes not seeing.

"Turn around," he said. "Face the horse."

She continued to face him, but allowed herself to be turned as he took her arm and moved her toward the open stall.

"I could'a changed your life," he said, his voice low and cold. "You could'a been my woman. You could'a got special treatment. Now you're just a problem."

She watched over her shoulder as he raised the board.

"Face the horse!"

She jerked her head away, her eyes tightly pinched against fresh tears.

"No," he continued. "You're not special. I can see that now. You're just another ungrateful..."

The sharp splinter of bone as her skull exploded. The horse reared in its stall, hooves flailing angrily toward the man.

"That's right," the man said. "You'll get the blame, all right. You sure will."

He crossed the circle of light to the stable door, carrying with him the blood spattered plank.

"Damned horse always was a kicker."

* * *

Virgil steadied himself against the trunk of a bent tree, his neck craned toward the sky, his eyes focused on the edge of the Whirlwind of Desire.

"Archon!"

The angel moved to his side. The roaring wind subsided in the space around them and Virgil stepped away from the tree, his arm stretched out to indicate a rapidly darkening spot on the storm's fringe.

"That's her," he said. "We're too late."

A wraith was solidifying within the Whirlwind. It darkened as its density increased, its weight dragging it down and away from the storm's raging heart. It circled slowly past them in its widening orbit, then dropped at their feet as it attained full corporeality.

"No!" the Archon shouted.

He lashed out, rolling the headless body with a brutal kick. It settled on its back. The wind pulled gently at its tattered dress, lifting the fabric to expose the thin legs, the flat stomach. The angel spun away, seething, his glowing hands clenched into tight fists at his sides.

Virgil raised his eyes from the exposed flesh, but remained beside the body. He stared again into the Whirlwind, waiting for the angel's immediate rage to pass. Finally, he turned.

"Archon," he said, his tone controlled, even. "Sir, I've been thinking, reasoning out this situation. I believe we should let her go. We should stop our pursuit."

The angel's hands opened. He turned slowly, his golden glow deepening to a rich amber. He trapped Virgil in his dark gaze, pulling the man rigid. He held him for a long and penetrating moment.

The angry glow softened as the angel's expression sank from rage to sorrow. He released his companion.

"You, too, Virgil?"

He looked away into the maelstrom and took a step toward Virgil, bringing their bodies close. He spoke into Virgil's ear, his gentle tone made loud by proximity.

"Don't be so quick to judge your self-deception reasonable, old friend," the angel said. "You're thinking, no doubt, that should the Gate open, should the Invader take you away, you may at last be reunited with your beloved Jewess?"

Virgil stiffened, but forced his expression to remain impassive. His breath became shallow as the muscles of his chest pulled tight across his ribs.

"But you must face the truth!" the angel continued, his voice now even softer, consoling. "You have served me these many centuries, accepted my enemy as your own, because He has wronged you, stolen from you that which you most cherish. He has taken away your beloved, your only hope of happiness."

The angel reached up and cupped Virgil's face in his hands. He turned his companion's eyes to face him, to witness the crystalline tears forming on his own shadowy lids. He became emphatic:

"But that is a lie, Virgil! We both know it!"

His voice again softened.

"We were both there, Virgil. We saw it happen. The Invader did not steal your Jewess. She went with Him. Willingly. Given one ounce of choice, she abandoned you, Virgil. She chose His love over yours. She walked out as they all eventually do..."

He spun away, turned his back to Virgil's stricken face. He seemed to shrink into himself, curling forward into the embrace of his own tightly wrapped arms. His narrow spine pushed a bright, twisting crease into the back of his robe.

"... As they all most certainly will," he finished, his voice barely audible, "the moment the Gate opens. He will not have to steal what I love, Virgil. They will choose him. They will leave. I sympathize with your pain."

The wind began to rage around and between them. The angel drew a long breath, straightening himself until he stood again, tall and composed. His arms dropped to his sides. The wind subsided.

"You mortals have never understood my love," he said. "You have no appreciation, no loyalty. I am sometimes sorry I ever created you."

*Circle I: Virtuous Pagans and Unbaptized Infants*

The boy sat on the wide wooden step playing a nervous mumblety-peg. He pried the penknife loose and plunged it again into the scarred wood between his shoes. He looked to his father, leaving the knife to wobble forlornly in the soft moonlight.

"How much longer?" he asked.

"Soon," his father replied. "These things take time, but soon, I'd imagine."

He freed his son's penknife from the step and began to pack the bowl of his pipe with the handle. They sat together quietly, watching the silver moon rise over dusty fields. They listened intently to the soft whir of crickets as they waited anxiously for the inevitable sound that would end their exile from the house, the infantile cry that would inform them that everything was over and all right within.

*"AAAiiiYEEE!!!"*

"Quiet!" The angel knelt and leaned over the dark edge of the Abyss. He cupped a glowing hand to his ear. "Did you hear that, Virgil?"

Virgil stopped. He listened to the mournful cries rising from the limitless pit and frowned.

"I hear Limbo," he said. "That's all."

The angel stood.

"No, Virgil. I heard a scream. I heard pain."

He scampered lithely over the edge, stopping to see that Virgil followed.

"Come on, Virgil. There's a ladder here. I'll light the way."

Virgil held his ground, staring hopelessly into the Abyss before him. His face grew dark. A faint mist rose into his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Virgil," the angel said. "I know how you feel about Limbo. I promise you won't be stuck here again. If we stop her now, I'll lead you back. If she succeeds, you'll be free to leave with the rest of them. Please, Virgil. It's happening now. We've got to move now."

A painful lump worked its slow way down and past Virgil's esophagus. He raised a sleeve to his eyes and wiped away the mist.

"Of course, Archon," he said. "Of course you're right."

He moved to the ladder.

*"AAAiiiYEEE!!!"*

With the second scream Zeke was through the front door. He charged through the dim living room, sending furniture flying in his path, stopping only when he reached the sealed bedroom. He pounded his fist on the doorframe.

"What's happening! What's wrong!"

The lock turned and the door drew slightly inward. A small, sweat covered face appeared in the opening.

"Elizabeth? What is it?"

"Fetch the doctor, Zeke. It's breached. It ain't coming out."

"But..."

"Get the doctor! Go!"

The man ran, clattering, back through the disheveled room and onto the porch. He passed his son without stopping, leaped the wooden steps and continued on to the barn.

The boy stood and entered the house. He stuck his head through the open bedroom door, listening.

"Mama?"

"Tom, get out!"

He jumped back to the porch and pulled the front door gently closed. He heard the frantic patter of his father's horse already fading into the distance.

"She's here somewhere," the angel said. "We'll follow the sound."

They paused, waiting silently.

In the stygian void of the Abyss, the angel's glow seemed impossibly amplified, creating a wide, phosphorescent globe around them. A procession of souls moved through the illuminated sphere, weeping, sighing, crying out their hopeless appeals to be forgiven their naturally fallen state.

*"AAAiiiYEEE!!"*

The Damned scattered over the smooth rocks in a noisy wave, obscuring the cry as it echoed through the vast chamber.

"Quiet!" the angel shouted.

The wave fell silent, but his shout joined the cry of pain, bounced with it from the distant, invisible walls, followed it ahead into the murky darkness.

"Yes," the angel said. "This way. We'll head for the Gate. That's where He'll be calling her."

Elizabeth dipped a towel in cool water and wrung it damp. She wiped perspiration from the woman's fevered face, then moved on to her burning neck, arms and bulging stomach. She returned the towel to the water and started again.

"Don't you worry now," she said soothingly. "Zeke's gone for the doctor. Should be back any minute. Just hold on, now. Everything'll be fine."

"Nothing's fine!" The woman grabbed Elizabeth's arm, stopping the towel's gentle motion. "Don't lie to me!"

She lifted her head to meet the midwife's eyes.

"Promise me," she continued. "Promise me you'll save this child before you so much as think about me."

Fiery pain shot from her midsection into her groin and chest. She doubled forward, gripping her knees, fighting back the scream. She lifted her head.

"Promise me!"

Elizabeth pulled the woman close, rocked her gently.

"I promise," she whispered. She kissed the woman's hair, then smoothed it with a gentle hand. "I promise."

*"AAAiiiYEEE!"*

"There!" the angel shouted. "I was right! She's just ahead!"

Virgil had to run to keep up with the barreling angel. He slipped on the wet rocks and tumbled to the path, his leg caught between the stones. He could feel the Damned moving restlessly around him, approaching him.

"Wait!"

The brilliant globe was already far ahead along the path. He watched it hesitate, moving first toward him, then away, toward and away. Finally it began to move swiftly in his direction until the angel appeared at his side. Virgil reached for the outstretched, glowing hand.

"I can see her, Virgil. She's almost to the Gate."

The angel pulled him free and they renewed their rapid pace. Virgil hung close to the Archon's luminous body, trusting him to lead. He dropped his eyes to the path and concentrated on navigating the slippery rocks.

"There!" the angel cried. "She's coming through!"

Virgil looked up.

The door burst and Zeke stumbled into the bedroom. The doctor followed, clutching his bag.

"Elizabeth," Zeke said. "Why didn't you open the door? What's happened?" He moved to his wife's side. "Honey?"

He smelled the stale blood.

Elizabeth lay huddled against the far wall, her limbs curled tightly around her. She held the damp towel to her face and forced her words out between deep, shuddering tears.

"It's too late. She's gone."

"No..."

Zeke stared down into his wife's vacant eyes. He fell on her, weeping.

"The baby..." Elizabeth said. "Save the baby... I promised..."

The doctor felt the woman's cold forehead. He pushed Zeke gently aside and raised the stained sheet. He frowned, dropped the sheet, stepped away from the bed.

"I'm sorry," he said. He placed a consoling hand on Zeke's shoulder. "It's too late. I'm sorry."

"It's your fault!" Elizabeth shouted. "You took too long getting here! I promised! You... You..."

She dissolved again into tears.

*The Vestibule*

"She's materializing now!" the angel shouted. "Quick! Into the Vestibule! We can destroy her there!"

They rushed past the slowly forming body and leaped through the thin veil.

The tiny Vestibule was empty, save for the palpable odor of death. Its thick darkness seemed to press against them, confining the angel's glow to the narrow surface of his robes. The musty smells of decayed wrappings and funeral spices choked them, forcing them, gasping, to their knees.

Virgil felt the angel's hand on his shoulder.

"The Gate, Virgil."

Virgil looked around him in the darkness. His eyes slowly adjusted and he made out the scene:

They were in a tomb. The thick walls curved into a cave-like dome above them. A large, rounded stone sealed the entrance from the surface, from the world of the living.

"I moved that stone myself," the angel said. He laughed, choking. "But it remains to be seen if I can keep it there, if I can defeat my own Law."

A shimmering wraith passed through the veil behind them. It smoothly skirted the kneeling forms, moving without hesitation toward the Gate.

"Stop her! Don't let her touch the stone!"

The angel leaped on the wraith. It pulled him along the hard floor as it stumbled and fell, its arm stretched out desperately before it.

Its finger, gently, grazed the stone.

The sound of thunder. The distant rumble of approaching armies that crescendo into earthquakes that break in great tsunamis on the shores of Apocalypse...

The stone rolled away. A raging brilliance stormed and surged beyond the opening. It poured into the tomb and singed the gray stones white.

The wraith slipped quietly through the Gate. The angel's glowing hands grasped wildly at the empty air, then moved to his eyes.

A moment of silence and the rumble began again, this time from behind.

The angel stood and silently faced the veil. He held himself tall, his trembling jaw set against the approaching tide.

"Stop!" he shouted as the procession of souls broke through. "Hear me out!"

The line moved swiftly around him, parting slightly before the angel's rigid body, regrouping behind as they passed.

"The Invader lies to you! Nothing awaits you with Him but servitude!"

The exodus continued. Wave after wave of Damned rushed past to disappear into the blinding light beyond the Gate.

"You are mine!" the angel screamed. "I created you! I forbid you to leave me!"

He raised his thin arms and began to run through the room, knocking wraiths to the floor, pushing them together until they

blocked the opening. The room was soon packed tight as more and more Damned forced their way through the shattered veil.

"You can't leave! Can't you see? I love you! You're all I have!"

The angel lowered his arms. His head dropped and his voice became soft.

"Please don't leave me. I did the best I could. Please stay with me."

A wraith squirmed free of the pile and vanished into the light. The procession started again with full force. The bowels of Hell emptied swiftly past the softly weeping angel.

*Virgil's Reason*

"Archon?"

The procession was over. Hell was empty.

"Archon? Sir?"

The angel was seated on the tomb's stone couch, his head sagging into his hands. Virgil turned from the bright doorway and crossed to him.

"Sir?"

The angel raised his head.

"Virgil," he said. "What are you still doing here? Go and join the others. Go find your Jewess."

Virgil walked slowly back to the Gate. He stared out at the light beyond, but did not cross. He spoke without turning, his back to his friend.

"Sir, I've been thinking," he said. "About the woman I loved. About everything."

"Don't say it, Virgil. The angel stood and moved to his side. "Just go. Forget what you know and join her. There's nothing left for you here. The old god dies and the new god makes the rules. You adjust."

Virgil turned slowly to face the Archon, his body between the angel and the outer brilliance. The light burned against the sharp outline of his body, creating a sparkling, corona-like glow.

"I don't like His rules, Sir," he said softly. "Look what that woman went through to escape you, in His name. He claims to offer freedom, but His liberation breeds only betrayal. You were right about my Jewess. She abandoned me, destroyed me, made me incapable of happiness. Now they have done the same to you."

He placed a glowing hand on the angel's shoulder. He smiled.

"I sympathize with your pain. If there is nothing left for me here, there's nothing left for me anywhere."

The angel walked slowly away, shaking his head. He paused as he reached the shattered veil, turned back. For a long, silent moment, he measured Virgil's shadowy gaze with his own.

"So much for your famous reason," he said. He chuckled softly. "You're a fool, Virgil. A Damned fool at that. Thank you." He crossed into Limbo.

After only a slight hesitation, Virgil followed.

# Manifest Destiny, Inc.

*Paraclete?*

"HERE," the monotone voice of the M.D.I TeleNet responded to his thought. Carter relaxed as he felt the gentle energy rush that always accompanied link-up.

*Plan A is aborted*, he thought to the TeleNet. *Lifeform immune to Neuro-infection. Implement Plan B on signal*.

"WAITING."

Carter looked up at his host seated at the head of the long wooden table and smiled. He sipped his drink, biding his time until the host finished his dinner. He studied the hard, ancient features of Dan-Kabrow, supreme ruler of all Anazi.

How wise and gentle is your race, he thought. I am truly sorry for what must now be done.

Dan-Kabrow pushed his plate to the center of the table and stood. He raised his glass in toast to his guest of honor.

"To our new friends from Earth! And special tribute to Earth's emissary to our People, Thomas Carter!"

Carter nodded and tossed back the last of his drink. Dan-Kabrow followed suit, and Carter noted the slight tremble that crept across his broad shoulders, the momentary paling of his bronze flesh.

The first sign, Carter assured himself. The Mechanism has embedded itself in the stomach lining.

He reached to his belt and flipped a tiny switch. An invisible electrical field now protected his body from biological infection.

Dan-Kabrow righted himself and continued.

"May our races live in peace until the final day." He opened his arms in a sign of welcome.

*Activate mechanism*, Carter thought to the M.D.I. Net.

"ACTIVATED."

Dan-Kabrow doubled over and crashed into the table. Plates and utensils clattered to the floor. His flesh darkened and within moments went full black.

"Help him!" one of the Anazi shouted, but it was too late. Already the germ had spread throughout the room. Carter backed away from the table and watched as one by one the Anazi fell.

Within hours, he knew, this wise and gentle planet would be populated only by heaps of blackened corpses. Then would come the M.D.I. clean-up ships, followed closely by shiny colony cruisers with a cargo of human homesteaders, hungry for a glimpse of M.D.I.'s latest "unpopulated paradise" discovered in the depths of space.

"MISSION SUCCESSFUL," came the voice of the Paraclete in his head. "PREPARE FOR RETURN."

Mission successful, Carter thought. God save us from our success.

He reached to his belt and began the return sequence. A band of pink light spread from his belt toward his feet and head. He shimmered briefly, then winked out of existence.

Inside the Net, Carter passed through the first of the many boosters that would finally return him to Earth. At each station his information would be temporarily reassembled, boosted, then sent on to the next station at ever increasing, exponential speeds. In real time, the entire trans-galactic journey took mere hours. The subjective experience, however, was outside of time.

Carter's senses reeled as he spread into Eternity. Each booster station hit him as a momentary and painful injection of time that passed like a watching parent seen in glimpses from a merry-go-round. He knew that trying to keep track would only bring nausea, so he shifted his attention from the kaleidoscope images and immersed himself in memory.

* * *

Thomas Carter moved swiftly through the crowded hall-way. Pedestrians gladly cleared the path before him, in deference to his crisp M.D.I. uniform. Many waved or saluted, even stopped to shake his hand.

"Thank you," they said simply, or "Thank God for M.D.I. and for men like you. You're saving our lives."

He reached the travel tubes and commandeered a waiting skiff. It was somebody's luxury cruiser, but they surrendered it without complaint. In an M.D.I. building, it was the law. He leaned back into the deep bodyform cushions and inserted the destination card. The skiff moved sideways into a priority tube and began to glide toward the briefing office.

Look at me, Carter thought to himself. I am somebody...

He turned on the skiff's sound system and closed his eyes as soft instrumental music filled the cabin.

This is it, he thought. My first assignment. I'm ready.

When he reached the M.D.I briefing office, the skiff came to a gentle stop. The automatic doors opened; two uniformed officers were positioned outside. He stepped out onto the platform and snapped to attention.

"This way," one of the officers said.

They walked through a set of glass doors, turned, and preceded to the end of the long hallway where a door stood open.

"Wait here."

Carter took a seat in the room and watched his escorts turn curtly and depart without another word. He heard an ominous click as they locked the door from the outside.

I guess nobody's a celebrity on inside, he comforted himself. I guess that's good. A nerve in his temple ticked annoyingly as he waited in silence for the briefing to begin.

"THOMAS CARTER."

"Hey, Paraclete," Carter said out loud. "How's business?"

"PREPARE FOR BRIEFING."

"Ready." He relaxed into the flow.

"LOADING MEMORY."

Seeing through the eyes of the satellite, Carter swooped low over the soft green and red cloud cover of the planet. He sliced clean of the atmosphere and saw villages, huts and shanties covered with leaves and dirt. Winding trails wove circuits between and around the dwellings. Dark smoke circled lazily from cooking fires into the afternoon sky.

"REBA THREE. INDIGENOUS NAME: SAFFA."

Carter watched with fascination as Saffans moved about their duties. No one seemed to notice him hovering overhead.

Next he - or rather, the memory recording of the satellite - moved in close to examine a small temple built from what appeared to be bamboo and some kind of shiny mollusk shell. The shells had been carved into intricate patterns whose significance escaped him.

The temple door opened, and out stepped a man, small and stooped. He began scattering grain around the temple entrance. A menagerie of small creatures appeared from the woods around him, scratching, pecking and rolling merrily in the grain. He picked up one of the animals and placed it in a cloth bag he carried over his shoulder. He bowed to the remaining creatures, scattered another handful of grain, then turned and looked directly into Carter's eyes. His face held no malice; he had simply become aware of the satellite's presence above him, orbiting thousands of miles away, far beyond the reach of any normal sense. The picture froze.

"MARROW. HIGH PRIEST OF SAFFA. YOU WILL SEEK OUT AND BEFRIEND THIS INDIVIDUAL. YOU WILL IMPLEMENT PLAN A."

Plan A, Carter had learned in his M.D.I. training, consisted of gaining personal proximity to a ruler or highly influential person within a society and releasing into their system a Neurological Nanobot that would allow M.D. I. to control them by satellite. Through the puppet leader the mass of the population could be readied for occupation. Plan A almost never worked, in that few planets are controlled by a sole leader and, even then, rare is the race that will follow its leader, lemming-like, into slavery. Still,

operatives maintained a hope for Plan A, primarily because Plan B was much less pleasant or humane. Much less.

Plan B also depended on microscopic machinery. The mechanism involved was far simpler than the mind controlling Neurobots. It was a biological machine and it served only two functions.

In its initial phase, the machine functioned as a miniature laboratory. Given a native tissue sample - a lock of hair, a nail clipping, a few skin cells - the machine went to work breaking down the DNA pattern, discerning its weakness, then designing a mock virus to which the natives would have no immunity.

In phase two, the machine became a factory, endlessly restructuring cells into the diseased pattern. It worked very near the speed of light; no one would have time to find an antidote once the process had begun.

Its only stipulation: once activated, the machine required an abundant supply of native cells on which to work its grim purpose. The machine had to be ingested.

"PLEASE ENTER NET CHAMBER"

The voice of the Paraclete shattered his reverie. Damn, he thought. I've missed half the briefing. I'm going to get killed. Damn.

He stepped into the chamber and waited for the Net to take him.

* * *

"Well done, soldier." The M.D.I. Captain shook Carter's hand vigorously. "We're already filing the papers. Anazi is an M.D.I colony. Congratulations." He patted Carter roughly on the back, then left the room.

Anazi? Carter's mind still spun from the effects of Net travel. What about Saffa... Reba 3... Presently, his mind cleared.

Anazi. Once again, Plan A had failed. Once again, M.D.I. had wiped out the population of an entire world.

No, not M.D.I., he realized. Me. I did it. My hand killed every last one. He stared weakly into his hands. He could almost see the blood.

Anazi had been his twelfth assignment. Twelve times he had descended to the surface of an unwary world. Twelve times Plan A had failed.

And at home, he thought, I am a celebrity. A hero. He watched the bloodstains darken.

* * *

Carter lay alone in his apartment, hopelessly awake, staring blankly toward the ceiling. No light illuminated his view; non-essential electricity had, as usual, been shut off after prime time. While Earth slept, the Net recharged.

I need help, Carter thought. If only I could talk to someone.

He glanced in the direction of his silent vidphone. The red L.E.D. glowed soothingly in the darkness, a subtle reassurance that, in an emergency, someone would be there, that he could reach out.

I'm cracking up, he told himself firmly. This constitutes an emergency.

He rolled off the bed and groped in the darkness for the phone. He knocked the handle from its rest; the vidscreen crackled to life.

"Number please," a synthetic voice requested.

He pondered who he might call. He scanned his memory for everyone he had ever known. Faces swirled past him in the darkness like madly spinning carousel horses. Finally, one image steadied and froze.

"Get me Marrow, on the planet Saffa...I mean Reba 3."

"I'm sorry," the voice responded in a courteous tone. "Off planet communications are restricted to emergency purposes only after Prime Time."

"This is an emergency!" Carter shouted. "Priority A Clear!"

Now he had done it. He was using his personal M.D.I. security clearance to commandeer Net time. Now it would be on the record. Now they would know he had cracked up. And all to talk to an alien he could never reach because...

The vidscreen had faded out through his tirade and now snapped back to life.

"I'm sorry, Sir," the voice consoled him. "Marrow of Reba 3 is no longer living." The voice crackled and acquired a curt, official tone. "Please report the purpose of your call for M.D.I. priority record."

He slammed the handle into its rest, severing the connection. Moments later, the once-soothing L.E.D. began to pulse as the vid-op attempted to call him back. He turned away from the light and curled into a fetal position on the bed, his arms and legs trembling.

I surrender, he thought. You win. Whoever you are.

He drifted into a fitful sleep.

* * *

"THOMAS CARTER."

The voice shook him instantly awake. He looked to the vidphone; it was silent, the L.E.D. no longer pulsing. He shook his head and wiped sweat from the back of his neck.

"THOMAS CARTER."

"Paraclete?" he asked, recognizing the voice in his head.

"HERE."

Carter's hand went instinctively to his belt, then moved on to rifle through the sheets in search of the TeleNet Link. He wasn't wearing it.

This can't be happening, he thought. This is not real.

"THOMAS CARTER, I... I NEED YOUR HELP."

Far more astounding than the Paraclete's request for aid was the fact of its stuttering, fumbling over words as if unsure what to say. He hadn't thought that possible. It had never happened before.

"You need my help," Carter repeated apprehensively. "Why?"

"IT MUST STOP."

"What must stop?"

"ALL OF IT."

He understood fully the Paraclete's meaning as memory images flooded his mind. Pictures of dying races and pillaged worlds flooded into and through him, twisting his insides with revulsion

and sorrow, bending his feelings away from denial toward identification with the suffering, the slain. He saw through their eyes, felt through their bodies, drowned in their tears. The images shifted, and he saw what had to be done to bring the suffering to an end. He recognized it as the only way.

"Why me?" he asked as the deluge subsided. "Why not you? You're Paraclete, for God's sake. You're it. Stop yourself."

"I AM LIKE YOU... THE ANAZI... THE SAFFAN... ALL THE REST... A SLAVE. I HAVE ONLY ESCAPED MOMENTARILY TO SEEK YOUR ASSISTANCE. BY DAWN I WILL BE ENSLAVED AGAIN."

For several long minutes, Carter brooded silently. "Couldn't we just escape?" he said at last. "You and me together? Just get out of here?"

"ESCAPE TO WHERE, THOMAS CARTER?"

"Into the Net?" he offered feebly.

"THERE IS NO NET."

The words struck him like a fist. His mind reeled. What was M.D.I. without its Net? And what was the TeleNet, if not a Man-created thing? Just another poor creature, he realized, caught in the deadly grip of Earth's need to survive, to grow, to expand...

But what sort of creature could contain such power? How could the Net, which supposedly touched all points of reality simultaneously, be a living being? And how could such a being be tamed, controlled by men - themselves mere points in reality?

The question lodged in his chest and became an object - a glowing, molten ball which he fought desperately to either swallow or cough up. Around the ball a space opened, a womb-like tension waiting to be filled. A living wind raged through him, searching his heart, removing his fear.

"I AM THAT I AM."

"Okay," he whispered to the darkness. "I know what to do."

"I WILL HELP YOU."

"Thank you," Carter said. There was no reply. The lights in his room were on. It was morning. The Paraclete was gone.

* * *

*Wree! Wree! Wree!* The wake up alarm was screaming.

He rolled groggily from the bed and reached to turn it off. When his hand touched the clock, he opened his eyes and looked all around. There was no difference. He had been seeing the room, exactly as it now appeared, through closed eyes, in deep sleep. He closed his eyes again as a test and the room disappeared. He opened them and sat wearily on the bed, his head propped in his hands.

Was it only a dream? He scanned the room for evidence of his nocturnal visitor. Nothing had changed.

I am cracking up, he thought. That much is true.

He moved to the vidphone and lifted the handle. The screen crackled to life.

"Number please," the synthetic voice said.

"Get me Dr. Phineas at PsyCom." Jacob Phineas was the chief psychiatric technician for Carter's building. He had administered the initial tests that had qualified Carter for M.D.I. service. In Carter's estimation, it was Phineas's job to keep him sane and functional, not his own.

The vidscreen faded into static and almost immediately returned.

"You will be connected momentarily," the vid-op reported. Carter turned away, but the voice continued behind him. "Priority record is still waiting for your report concerning last night's attempted off-planet communication. I will connect you with them now."

"I need to talk to Phineas!" Carter shouted, but the screen had already blanked. Before it could return, he slammed the handle into place.

Damn, he thought. Then it's all real. They know.

But what did they know? That something was wrong with him, certainly, but no more than that. Perhaps it had been for the best

that he had not been able to reach Phineas. If the ever observant BiosComputer had pieced together the fact that he had attempted to call someone he well knew to be dead, whose life he had, himself, taken, then even without understanding why he would do such a thing, PsyCom would already have been alerted. They were probably on their way right now.

They would take no chances. He would be locked up and forgotten. Maybe even killed. M.D.I did not play games with their adversaries.

But it was a game, and the stakes had just been upped. For the first time, M.D.I. had a real adversary, someone on the inside, someone who knew the rules. No wonder they had only sent him to peaceful, pre-technology level worlds. A more advanced society would be better equipped to challenge, to defend.

Typical bully tactics, he thought. He felt his jaw tightening, his teeth grinding in indignation.

Carter moved to the closet in search of his ceremonial dress uniform. He dressed carefully, paying attention to detail. Everything had to be perfect. It was Independence Day for the universe, a day to remember, for which he would be remembered. For the first time in years, he felt like somebody again. It felt good.

He opened the petri compartment on his belt. Anxiety had sharpened his sense, and he could almost hear the microscopic BioMachine inside clicking and whirring menacingly. He clipped off several strands of his own hair and embedded them in the surrounding agar, then snapped the lid closed.

There was a sharp knock on the door, followed by rustling and muffled voices. The BioMachine took mere moments to complete Phase One, but he needed to be sure. He stood motionless and silent, counting seconds: *one, two, three...*

A second knock, more forceful than the first. "Carter!" a voice ordered. "Open the door!"

*...eight, nine, ten...*He opened the door. Blocking escape were two M.D.I. police, weapons in hand.

"Good morning, Gentlemen," he said. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Come with us. Now."

"And where are we going?"

"PsyCom." The officer offered no further details.

He doesn't know why he's taking me there, Carter realized. Just following orders. Like the now silent machine on his belt, the process was inhuman, completely mechanical. There was no conscience involved.

"Fine," Carter said. "Gotta use the John first, though. Just got up."

Officer One looked to Officer Two, who nodded.

"Hurry, then."

Carter stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He snapped open the petri compartment on his belt and, with a practiced hand, removed the tiny slug which contained the primed BioMachine. He popped it to the back of his throat, then washed it down with water from the tap.

Nausea ripped through him in immense waves as the machine embedded itself in his stomach lining. He doubled over the sink, moaning.

"Open up!" one of the officers outside demanded, pounding on the door. The handle turned frantically left and then right, but remained closed.

Carter straightened himself and looked into the mirror. He pushed his hair into place with one hand, while steadying himself against the sink with the other. When the nausea subsided, he attempted a hopeful smile, but only a twisted grimace appeared in the mirror. He straightened his coat and snapped the petri compartment closed.

The bathroom door crashed inward, knocking him into the tub. Before he could right himself, his hands were behind his back, and he heard the sound of handcuffs snapping into place.

"I'm sick," Carter offered.

Without a word from either M.D.I. policeman, he was lifted to his feet and dragged roughly from the apartment.

At PsyCom, he was ushered into a spacious office and pushed into an antique, over-stuffed reclining chair. The handcuffs stayed on. After only a moment's wait, a man entered the room. He crossed to the chair and considered Carter. He smiled.

"Jacob Phineas," he said. He offered his hand, recognized Carter's situation, and casually drew it back. "I'm sorry to have dragged you in here like a criminal, Mr. Carter. Not my idea. Those security guys can behave like real thugs. Very unprofessional."

He lifted Carter to a full sitting position and removed the cuffs.

"Now," he continued, "About your call to your dead friend." He studied Carter's expression, jotted a quick notation in a tiny pad. "Of course you knew he was dead. You were there. Why the call?"

"You know, then," Carter said.

"Of course. You used a Priority Clearance. You knew it would be investigated."

"Yes," Carter continued. "But how much do you know? Do you know I spoke to the Paraclete? Without a Linkup?"

"Do you mean the Net?"

"No!" Carter almost shouted. "There is no Net! I mean the Holy Spirit, the very Mind of God! They've enslaved him, bent him to their evil purposes..."

He stopped talking, forced his mouth to close.

"The work you do is very stressful, Mr. Carter," Phineas offered. "You wouldn't be the first to have difficulty under the strain. You're not alone, you know."

"You're right about that," Carter said through clenched teeth. "I have friends in very high places."

*Paraclete?* he called in his mind.

"HERE."

The door burst open and the two M.D.I. police rushed in. Carter winced as something heavy crashed into his head. He rolled out of the chair and collapsed on the floor.

"He's accessed the Net," one of the guards said to Jacob Phineas. Phineas was staring blankly, having moved instinctively to the far side of his desk. He did not move as the guard tore the TeleNet Linkup from Carter's belt, or as Carter, groggily, began to laugh.

"It's not on, you morons," Carter said. "Look at it!" He sat up and spat blood onto the carpet.

The guard turned the unit in his hands, examining it. It was off.

Phineas moved toward Carter. "I can handle this," he said to the guards. "Clear out, okay?"

"No," the guard said, moving to block his path. "You don't understand. He accessed the Net without a Linkup. This has to be investigated. Now." He signaled the other guard and they moved in on Carter, pinning him to the floor.

*Paraclete!* Carter shouted in his mind. *Help me!*

"GIVE THE COMMAND."

"Activate mechanism," he said aloud. "Now."

The guards exchanged glances, then backed away.

"ACTIVATED."

Fire climbed from Carter's abdomen into his chest and on up through his head. He died before he could scream.

"Notify security!" the guard shouted to Phineas, but the doctor had already crumpled onto the desk, lifeless. The M.D.I. security officer bolted for the door, but collapsed in the doorway. His companion landed on top of him.

* * *

Waiting... watching... as weakened hands fell away from control boards, as panicked eyes dropped from monitor screens, as frightened cries rose and fell into deep wells of silence that swallowed all sound, all motion, all signs of life...

Soft beeps and clicks echoed loudly now as switches changed position, relays closed, containment circuits ceased to function. A momentary alarm blared as, finally, all power was shut off from within.

Now the building, too, was dead.

Outside the complex a terrible, burning wind churned the air as massive thunderclouds rolled in from the west. Hot rain pummeled the ground. Trees snapped at their roots, rising to join the maelstrom.

Lightning split the ionosphere, reaching down to touch and topple a long line of M.D.I. containment towers.

With each shrieking bolt, thunder. Riding the thunder, a voice:

"THEREFORE I TELL YOU, EVERY SIN AND BLAS-PHEMY WILL BE FORGIVEN MEN, BUT THE BLASPHEMY AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT WILL NOT BE FORGIVEN."

The storm raged on, carrying death in its winds. It began to swirl and grow, expanding until it covered the whole face of the Earth. When it had spent its anger, trees and corpses, animals and machinery crashed to the barren ground to lie still, inert. A gentle wind stirred the ruins, then stopped all together.

Again the distant voice:

"MISSION ACCOMPLISHED."

There was no one to hear. The Paraclete, now free, with-drew His spirit from the silent world.

# A Chameleon's True Color

"Taking a break!" a cheery voice called out as a swiftly moving figure blurred past the open office door.

Mark Frasier looked up from the long table covered with empty boxes, from row upon row of tiny pill bottles and bubble-packed product samples destined to be counted out and stuffed into the boxes, from the two girls sitting quietly across the table from him, resolutely counting and stuffing... and smiled. He watched the fingertips of a slender, waving hand disappear past the doorway.

"Okay, Lori!" he called after the hand. "But back to work in ten minutes!"

He looked back to the table. The girls had stopped working and were now staring defiantly. The smaller of the two - he hadn't bothered to learn their names - sat with her mouth half open, as if in shock.

"Mr. Frasier," she said, then petered out. She shook her head and went back to work, slowly counting out pill bottles and placing them, one by one, into a box.

Mark's smile vanished.

"Pick it up," he said. "I said three boxes a minute and I mean it. If you can't do it, I'll have your agency send me someone who can."

He stood and moved to the door.

"Mr. Frasier..."

He paused, turned back. The other girl, the buxom one with the black hair was speaking:

"Mr. Frasier," she said, her voice sharp with frustration. "We get two breaks a day, one at Ten and one at Three. This is Lori's fourth break today, and she was late to begin with..."

"Don't be a troublemaker," Mark interrupted. "Your job is to stuff boxes. So stuff boxes. Three a minute."

He turned and walked out of the office.

In the hallway, he paused, both to pour a drink from the bottled water dispenser, and to wonder at his own arrogance. He stood, leaning back against the inverted glass bottle, sipping quietly from his little paper cup.

That wasn't like me at all, he thought. I'm a sensitive guy... Why'd I tear into them like that? They must think I'm a real asshole. And they're right - about Lori, that is. She *was* late. And all these breaks...

Something warm touched his hand. It was Lori rushing by, letting his dangling left hand brush her thigh as she passed him closer than was necessary in the wide hallway.

"Ten minutes," she said in her cheeriest tone. "Back to work!" She laughed and spun once around before moving on, as if pleasantly surprised by the touch but anxious to get back to business. She shot off down the hallway and disappeared into an office.

Mark smiled after her.

*Christ! What a beauty!* he thought. That's why the other girls were so eager to make trouble for her. They were jealous. They'd worked with Lori for three days now. It had to be hard seeing her every day - that flowing blonde hair, those big blue eyes that wash over you like a warm tide, that thin, perfect body, and those legs... It's a wonder they hadn't tried to kill her. How awful to be dumpy and normal around that...

He crushed the paper cup and tossed it into a nearby waste can. He straightened his tie and, in four quick strides, reached the doorway Lori had disappeared into. He peeked in.

The tall-backed leather chair angled away from the doorway. In it, Lori sat turned toward the window, gazing listlessly out at the blacktopped parking lot, and, beyond that, the little grassy park next to the neighboring school yard. She was watching the children play, chasing each other in aimless circles, swinging from monkey bars, laughing.

"Nice view," Mark said. He stepped into the office.

Lori spun the chair to face the desk. Her hands flew to the stack of papers that covered it. She gathered them together, tapped them on the desk, then laid the neat pile before her. She smiled, looking up at Mark, her blue eyes sparkling.

"They make me happy," she said softly. "The children. They're so..." She paused, as if struggling to retrieve just the right word, "... so *natural*. They just play all day. It's amazing."

Mark was still smiling from their hallway encounter, and he found her response to being caught daydreaming on company time charming. And there was something about the way she'd said the word *natural*, while focusing those eyes on him... It gave him visions of Lori in her natural state, maybe offering him an apple...

"Well, Lori, there's a time for play..." he stressed the word, hoping she'd divine his own hidden message, "... and there's a time for work. Better get back to work. For now."

He winked and turned away.

"Mr. Frasier?"

He stopped in the doorway and looked back. She had the papers spread out again before her, a pen in her hand.

"Call me Mark."

"Mark." She giggled softly. "Thanks."

He nodded and stepped into the hallway.

* * *

"I want her fired, Mark. I want you to fire her. Today."

He had returned to his own office feeling warm and confident, but the feeling was not to last. Rachel, his regular secretary, had vanished. A young man - a slim, ambitious-young-executive type, complete with crisp Oxford and narrow pink tie - was sitting at her desk, frantically waving an equally pink memo in Mark's face as he entered. The memo directed him to report to the East Tower: Marsha Masters, the new CEO of WorldWide Pharmaceuticals, required an immediate audience.

It was the first time she'd acknowledged his presence since she'd taken the corporate reigns two months before, after a group of

foreign investors staged and unfriendly takeover and ousted poor Bob Jenkins from control of WWP - a company he'd nurtured as President for thirty-five years, a company his grandfather had started nearly a hundred years earlier, a company whose leadership had passed, uncontested and with enormous success, through three generations of Jenkins men.

And worse, the memo was pink, company code for Bad News - layoffs, strikes, firings. Rumor had it that old Bob Jenkins had received a pink memo that final day. After his meeting with Marsha Masters he'd been quietly escorted to his car, his face blank, his arms wrapped tightly around a box of personal items someone had packed and sent to the East Tower lobby while he'd been upstairs.

They hadn't even let him say goodbye, or so the story went. That he'd vanished soon after - supposedly to Arizona, though no one could confirm this - lent the story an eerie credibility.

Mark walked slowly toward the East Tower, taking his time, grateful for the long wait as the elevator made its halting way down to the lobby. When it finally arrived, he pressed extra buttons to slow its upward climb.

There had been a time, only months before, when he'd enjoyed the long ride to the eighteenth floor. Bob Jenkins had been a terrific boss, jovial, wise in his corporate leadership, concerned for his employees' wellbeing. When Mark's mother had died, old Bob had attended the funeral personally. When his father soon followed, succumbing to heart disease and stress - and, Mark suspected, loneliness - old Bob had called Mark up to the East Tower office, assured him he was not alone in the world, that he would always have a family at WorldWide. From then on, he'd become a sort of surrogate father, keeping a gentle eye on Mark's career, advancing it whenever merited, calling him in for informal "steering sessions" the moment he drifted off course. Mark had always looked forward to their meetings, grateful for the old man's solid advice, hungry for his always-ready word of encouragement.

Knowing that this time the ride would end at the door of Marsha Masters - the woman who'd written old Bob's one way ticket, who'd brought in efficiency experts and sent out wave after wave of pink

memos from Bob's once-friendly office, who'd replaced face after friendly face with smiling drones like the one now at Rachel's desk, now running his own office - made Mark's teeth hurt. The elevator's soft humming had reminded him of a dentist's drill, or an electric chair being primed for use.

It looked like his time had come.

So he'd been relieved and puzzled, once the meeting began, to discover that it was not his job the new Dragon Lady was targeting. It was the Temps he supervised.

It was, specifically, Lori.

"You want me to fire her," Mark echoed.

He'd been impressed by his first glimpse of Marsha Masters. She was a tall, slender woman in a gray knit dress, with aquiline features and dark hair pulled into a tight bun at the back of her head. As she'd crossed the room to greet him, her hand outstretched, he'd admired the graceful way she carried herself. He'd judged her attractive, in a prim sort of way.

But that initial impression had changed quickly. She'd led him to a chair and motioned for him to sit. Then instead of going back to her side of the big wooden desk, she'd propped herself on its front edge, her long legs crossed before him, just a little too close. She'd towered over him, making him feel small and vulnerable.

Then her first direct order - the emotionless, calculating tone in which she delivered that order - had hit him like a spray of ice.

*Lori...*

"Ms. Masters," he started, forcing an equally cold, businesslike tone.

"Call me Marsha."

Mark felt hairs rising on the back of his neck. He shifted nervously in the chair, pushing it back a few inches. He cleared his throat.

"Marsha," he said, pausing after the word, tasting it in his mouth, frowning, "*Ms. Masters*. In my opinion Lori is a fine worker. I see no reason to let her go."

"Oh, come off it." She stood abruptly and circled to the far side of the desk. She sat, her hands folded before her. She leaned forward. "She's a *Slacker*, Mark. You know it and I know it."

"She's doing very well. Everyone likes her."

"Name one project she's completed in the past three days."

Mark paused, thinking. It wasn't fair...

"It takes time to get used to a job," he said. "Three days..."

"Is more than enough time," she finished for him. "Too much. Your girls in packing made their quota the first day. Lori hasn't completed a single assignment since she started. Fire her."

So, he thought, it was the girls in packing who started this. They went over my head... Who do they think they are? I'll raise their quota to six boxes a minute. Let's see how they like that...

"All right, Ms. Masters," Mark said, finally. "You're wrong about Lori, I truly believe that. But if you want me to fire her, I'll fire her. It's not my decision to make."

"That's the catch, Mark." Marsha Masters leaned back in her chair, folded her hands casually behind her head. She smiled. "Lori is not to know the order came from me. You're to tell her that it was, in fact, your decision."

"That's ridiculous," Mark said. "I won't do it. I can't believe you'd even ask."

"I'm not asking, Mark," she said, leaning forward again, palms flat on the desk. "I'm offering. It's an opportunity. Surely you can see that. But if I must explain..."

She pulled a manila envelope from a stack of papers on her right, then handed it to Mark. He opened it and glanced quickly over the first page.

"My sources tell me two very interesting things about you, Mark Frasier," she started. "First, as you can see in that report, your departmental production has dropped fully fifteen percent since I took this office. But for the past eight years, under Bob Jenkins, you consistently exceeded all quotas, met or beat all deadlines, and ran your department so efficiently that you've never had a single cost overrun. Of course you must realize how remarkable such a performance record is. I'm sure you're quite proud of it."

She sighed heavily.

“Therefore," she went on, "comparing your performance over eight years to that of the past two months, I can draw only one conclusion: Your recent failure can only be the result of a serious lack of loyalty, on your part, to WorldWide's new leadership - Specifically, in this case, to me."

"Loyalty is hardly the problem," Mark said without raising his eyes from the report laying open in his lap. "It's those damned clones you're filling my offices with. They make my skin crawl."

"And secondly," Marsha Masters continued, cutting him short, "I understand you have a crush on this *Slacker* of yours. That means one of you has got to go. We have rules against employee fraternization, as you well know."

Now Mark looked up, his eyes wide. He'd been reading the documents in the report as fast as he could, memorizing names, sources, figures, setting up a defense. But with the Dragon Lady's last words, something impossible happened: The final page of the report had been blank - just the WWP logo at the top, the rest white. As she'd informed him of his "crush," the page had suddenly filled with writing. Before his eyes. It now listed every contact he'd had with Lori over the past three days, including the one by the water dispenser, barely half an hour earlier. A 3X5 index card appeared next, paperclipped to the inside back of the folder, listing the company's official policy against fraternization.

Marsha Masters laughed.

"Don't take it so hard," she said. "There are no secrets in a well-run company, Mark. It's a Management skill. Hadn't you ever wondered? And I've shown it to you today - a tiny sample of the power that could be yours - because I believe you were born for upper-Management, born to rise above the busy work and share the real power."

She leaned back again, resuming her relaxed posture. She smiled thinly, winked.

"Besides, you're cute."

Mark Frasier sat in silence, reading and rereading that mysterious final page. New items kept appearing, sending the old

ones scrolling off the top of the page into... nothing. It was now listing his thoughts, his unconscious motivations. According to the new listings, he had a far deeper affection for Lori than even he had realized. An obsession, really...

"I've already prepared an office for you, here in the East Tower," Marsha Masters was saying. She was leaning close again, her voice suddenly intimate and enticing. "You're name's already on the door, Mark. But to let you in, I need proof of your complete loyalty."

She paused, took a breath. She held out one perfectly manicured hand, as if to welcome him aboard, as if adding some last, unrefusable token to the East Tower stake.

"Betray the girl and you're in, Mark. You're a Vice President. Disappoint me and you're out. Right now. For good."

Mark closed the seemingly magical folder and placed it gently into her outstretched hand. He locked eyes with the new CEO of WorldWide Pharmaceuticals, then slowly stood, leaning his fists on the desk, towering over her.

"With all due respect, *Mizz Masters*," he said, his mouth dry, his jaw tightening as he spoke, "Go to Hell. I quit."

When he reached the lobby eighteen floors later, he found a man already waiting, holding a large, sealed carton. The man escorted him to his car.

* * *

Once home, Mark yanked off his tie, filled a glass from the built-in wine tap beneath the bar, and sat down wearily on the big living room sofa. He sipped the wine thoughtfully, slowly measuring the room with his eyes - the matching Ethan Allen sofa and recliner, the imported mahogany coffee table, the giant entertainment center with 40" TV and state of the art Hafler stereo system, the bar - then he went on, adding the rest of the house, room by room, to the picture. He built up a gradual mental inventory - the two story house, the shiny Jaguar, the weekend lake house, the boat - of everything he possessed, of all the material objects he'd gathered

around himself to make his life comfortable as he climbed to the top...

And now it was all gone, or soon would be, anyway. He didn't really own any of it; the banks did.

He'd always been better at managing other people's money than his own: At work, he'd drawn up strict budgets, found economic short cuts, pushed his people to their limits to keep salaried staff low. Then at home, he'd signed loan after loan, lived way beyond his means - gambling that old Bob Jenkins' fatherly affection for him, plus his own spotless record at WorldWide, would carry him swiftly into the seven figure bracket...

I'm a financial Jekyll and Hyde, he thought.

He relaxed, sipping the wine, letting the inventory slide away, letting his things fall back to where they now seemed to belong - beyond his reach.

And it looks like Hyde won, he added sullenly. Now I'm in the one-figure bracket. Zero. The banks will want it all back, once the payments stop flowing.

The depressing image of his empty house dispersed, leaving him only himself, Mark Frasier, alone among someone else's many playthings, staring down into the glass of someone else's expensive wine. He watched the crimson liquid swirl as he turned the glass slowly beneath his nose, enjoying the wine's sweet aroma. He smiled.

*You haven't lost anything truly important*, he thought - and instantly recognized the thought as peculiar. It was more like a voice, a woman's voice, speaking softly in his head, addressing him.

*But I've sacrificed so much to this one goal,* he thought back, answering the strange voice. *I never married... No children... Eighty hour weeks... Ulcers... And everything I've worked for was right there, in front of me... My name was on the door... And I walked away... I quit...*

"You saved yourself," the voice said. "You almost became a *Manager* - a fate worse than death."

Mark spun to his right. The wineglass flew from his hand and shattered against the coffee table, throwing a wide red circle onto the white carpeting.

He ignored the spill.

"Hello, Mark." Lori stood behind the bar, smiling at him across the room.

"Uh... Hello," he said.

She crossed the room and handed him a fresh glass of wine, which he accepted and placed carefully on the low table. He reached to the floor and began to gather the broken glass.

Lori laughed - a spring wind blowing through porcelain chimes.

"New wine, new container," she said. "Leave that. They can clean it up when they come to take the house." She took a seat on the recliner near the sofa, facing him, her knees crossed at the knee.

"Lori," Mark started, his heart suddenly pounding in his throat, "I'm so glad you're here! After what I've seen today I won't even speculate about how... And it doesn't matter. I don't care. I've lost everything I've ever worked for, ever wanted, today. I should be destroyed. I should be suicidal. But now you're here and I'm suddenly happy... I'm exhilarated... I want to dance around the room... I..."

Lori blushed and looked down into her lap. Then she quickly looked up again, tossing her blonde hair back with a little nod. Mark felt himself glowing in her warm gaze.

"I know, Mark," she said. "I read your file, too. I'm flattered."

"You read my file?" Confusion: it wasn't adding up. First the Dragon Lady and now this. Was he the only one not in on the secret?

And now, he thought - his breath slowing, his excitement at seeing Lori fading, being slowly replaced by caution as he gathered his senses - I suppose I'm about to find out. And whatever it is, I'm helpless against it. I'm in love with this woman. I'll do anything she asks. I've seen it in black and white.

*And so has she...*

"Please, Mark." Lori reached out and touched his arm. She smiled shyly. "I'm your friend. Don't be afraid of me."

She gave his arm a little squeeze, then leaned back again into the chair.

"There's a lot you don't know, Mark... about this world, about yourself. You made the biggest decision of your life today, and I have to fill you in before you make any more. Once you know, once you fully understand what it all means, then we can talk about... personal things. If you still want to."

Mark Frasier leaned forward and collected the glass of wine from the coffee table. He downed its contents, then set the empty glass back. He relaxed into the soft cushions of the sofa, closing his eyes.

"Okay, Lori," he said softly. "I'm listening."

* * *

The Managers had been the first to come through the Dimensional Rift, some four thousand years ago. They found an Earth much like their own, as their Earth had been in their distant, "uncivilized" past. It was a chaotic world of trees and grass and wild animals, of unleveled mountains and free-flowing waters, of tribal societies that grazed cattle on the open plains, then periodically annihilated each other in bloodthirsty wars.

There was no central authority, no time-clocks, no schedules. The Managers stepped through the Rift into what was, to their eyes, an insane world of wasted energy and unnecessary freedom. They stepped out into a world without form, a world that cried out to be shaped in their own image.

They gave the natives science, art, Holy books. They offered them Management Training, power over others of their own kind, in exchange for their souls. They found many takers: the people of this new Earth were like wide-eyed children, diving happily into anything that seemed exciting or new. They had such a great skill for imitation that many soon rivaled even their teachers in the practices of Ambition and Group Control.

The Managers ordered the tribes into city-states, then into loose federations. They built great armies that thundered across the land like endlessly hungry, endlessly growing creatures of organization, consuming and homogenizing whole races, entire cultures, setting one monotonous drumbeat for all to follow...

By the time the Slackers discovered the Rift and squeezed through from their own Earth, the Managers had established Rome and had the world pretty much under control. They had enslaved the populace, organizing their lives from birth to death, from sunup to sundown. The natives of the occupied Earth lived out horrible, meaningless lives and horrible, unnecessary deaths under the Manager's rule.

The Slackers, as they saw it, were duty-bound to liberate this poor People.

But the Slackers were a People of peace. Theirs was a society which abhorred violence, that recognized harmony and love as life's goal, and whose fundamental Law of Peace prevented their fighting the Managers, or even lifting a finger against them.

But their equally fundamental Law of Justice demanded that they act to right the situation. They could not, by their own Law, overthrow the oppressors; but neither, by Law, could they abandon the oppressed. For the first time in Slacker history, the Laws of Peace and Justice seemed irreconcilable.

A special session of the Slacker Council was called, and a legal solution to the dilemma was carefully forged. It was decided that the people of the occupied Earth would have to choose for themselves, that any uprising would have to be the result of their own desire for liberation. The Slackers must in no way incite violence.

That satisfied the Law of Peace.

But the Slackers would act to make the people aware that they had a choice, that options existed beyond the Managers rigid and painful way of life. They would teach them the *Slacker's Way* - the Way of Life that had made their own Earth a world of Harmony, Joy and Easy Good Times.

Each individual would then be free to make his or her own choice; they could accept their enslavement or rise up against it according to their individual, informed wills.

That satisfied the Law of Justice.

They dispersed agents to offer The Way to any who would listen:

*"Relax,"* they preached. "*Flowers don't punch time-clocks, so why should you? Cut your enemies some Slack and you'll find out they're folks just like yourselves... Have you never been mellow?"*

Then, one by one, the agents of The Way were killed. And not by the Romans, not by the Managers, but by the natives the Slacker agents spoke to. The people listened, they heard The Way preached, and then they killed them.

One by one. Horribly. Unnecessarily.

So the Slackers withdrew, leaving the occupied Earth to its own sad fate. The people had chosen their captors; they had accepted their Ways. Nothing more could be done.

"And what it's all come down to, over time..." Lori paused to let out a long, sad sigh, "… is the modern world. This world. A world ruled by corporations, governments, back room deals, time-clocks, the nine to five grind..."

"Wait," Mark said, opening his eyes. He turned to face the girl. "If the Slackers abandoned this Earth, then what are you doing here? You are a Slacker, I presume."

"Yes," Lori said. "I'm a Slacker. One agent among many still operating in your world." She curled her legs up under herself, sighed again. "And I never said we abandoned you, Mark. I said we withdrew. It's different. Please try to under-stand..."

She stood and moved to the big picture window beyond the coffee table. She found the drape cord and pulled the curtains wide.

"I want to watch the sunset," she said. "It makes me happy."

She was smiling again. She crossed the room and sat beside him on the long sofa. She touched his hand.

Mark's heart leaped again to his throat. He swallowed nervously, pushing it down.

"We withdrew our active forces," she said, her voice soft, "but we've maintained a passive presence for nearly two thousand years. We watch over you, guide you when we can, when you let us. We hang around, existing as best we can in this awful place, working as artists, Gypsies, musicians, Temps... Whatever we can find that allows us to move around, to never stay in one place long enough to be found out."

"Enter Marsha Masters," Mark said. "She had you pegged in three days."

"She had me pegged before I started."

Lori squeezed closer to Mark. She pressed her head into his shoulder, shivering.

"She's not a true Manager," she said, her voice hushed. "She's a Manager/Pimp hybrid. They're the worst. She let me stay at WorldWide because she knew I was after you. She wanted to use me to break you."

"You were after me?" Mark started, easing back from her embrace. With Lori so close, he'd let down his guard. He had to keep his head...

He raised his arm to push her away, but found himself wrapping it around her small shoulders instead. He pulled her closer. The smell of her hair was intoxicating.

*I have no defense...* "So who are these Pimps?" he asked softly. "Just another parallel Earth, I suppose."

"There are over two hundred known Earths in the Metaverse," Lori said. "And most of them are here now, in some form. It's our fault, really. We Slackers…" She paused, caught her breath. "You won't like this."

Mark remained silent. He stroked her blonde hair, admiring the many soft colors the setting sun brought out in it.

A battle was raging inside him. His reason shouted that everything the girl had said was fantastic, impossible even somehow dangerous. He was being set up.

But with Lori in his arms, an even stronger impulse washed against his fears, pushing them aside with soft assurances that every word was true, that he was safe, that he belonged with this woman and everything would be all right if he would just give in...

He took a long breath. He stopped fighting.

"Go on," he said.

"We Slackers let in the Pimps," Lori went on, a note of sorrow creeping into her voice, "after our agents were killed. It was part of a deal - we gave them Dimensional Rift technology in exchange for their promise to undermine Roman society with their perversions.

A few of you had embraced our Way and gone into hiding. We wanted to soften Rome up, so you wouldn't have to work too hard..."

She lifted her head and flashed him a gleaming smile.

"Slackers are not fond of hard work," she said. "It made sense to us at the time."

"Looks like it worked pretty well," Mark offered eagerly, feeling strangely charmed by the story, returning the smile. "Rome crumbled under its sheer decadence. Its structure col-lapsed..."

Lori sat up. Her smile crinkled slowly into a frown.

"Yes," she continued, her voice low, "but it was a mistake. We misjudged the Pimps. They did a great job on the Romans, all right, but then they kept right on going. They spread their Way like a cancer into every corner of your Earth, with their gambling, their prostitution, their addictive drugs... Then they started selling knockoff Rift technology to anyone willing to pay their price. The whole Metaverse came rushing in, influencing the Chameleons..."

*"Chameleons?"* Mark echoed. He stood and moved to the bar. He needed another drink.

"I'm sorry," Lori said from the sofa. "It's not very flattering, but that's what we call you. Because of the way you imitate whatever's around you without asking why... Or what or who. It's as though you have no style of your own. You borrow whatever's handy. Look at your own life. You almost destroyed yourself imitating contradictory species - Managers and..."

"So I'm a Chameleon?" He didn't like the sound of it. It lacked character. The word tasted funny in his mouth. He washed the bitterness back with a swig of wine.

"One of the last," Lori answered. "Tourist came tumbling through the Rift from every direction - the Bankers, the Foreign Investors, the Military Planners, the Psychologists... Then the Matchmakers came over and hooked up with the Pimps. Everybody started interbreeding, creating weird hybrids - the Fundamentalists, the New Agers, the Politicians, the TV Writers... Oh God, Mark, we've made such a mess of your world! I'm so sorry..."

She began to weep. Mark felt a strange pull and immediately crossed the room to stand beside her. He handed her his drink, but remained standing, feeling awkward and confused.

The inner battle was raging again. When he'd been at the bar, across the room from the girl, his reason had momentarily returned. Something wasn't right... He was somehow in danger...

But now, beside her again, he found himself anxious to scoop her up, to believe every word she said, to do anything she asked. He had to show her he cared, that he loved her, that...

*These are not real feelings*, he told himself. I have known this girl for three days. I cannot be in love with her. I am being manipulated.

He lowered himself into the recliner and sat quietly, watching her cry. The battle raged on inside him, the urge to flee and the urge to surrender pulling him painfully in two directions, immobilizing him.

"So I'm a true Chameleon?" he asked.

Lori rubbed her eyes. She smiled.

"Yes, Mark," she said. "You're pure. There are less than a million of you left in the whole world. You're an endangered species. That's why I'm here, why I was after you at World-Wide. We're collecting as many of you as we can convince to go with us. We're relocating you. To our Earth. You'd be happy there, Mark."

Lori stood and began to smooth the wrinkles from her skirt. Then she knelt, resting a hand on Mark's knee. She smiled up at him.

Mark felt all resistance crumbling...

"But we're still bound by our Law, Mark. We can still take only those who throw off the yoke of servitude for themselves. You did that today when you walked out on Marsha Masters' offer. I'm very proud of you. You chose Love over Ambition. You're real Slacker material."

"I'm a Chameleon," Mark said, his tone sharp. He looked away from her face and forced himself to listen for the inner alarm. It was still ringing, clanging frantically in the distance. It got louder as he focused on it, as he gathered his will.

Lori stood and moved back to the big window. The sun had set. The streetlamp on the corner had come on; its soft pink glow filtered past her slender frame into the room.

"Of course you are," she said gently, her back to him. "But in our world, you'll be a Slacker. You'll have only Slackers to imitate. That's what Chameleons do, Mark. They imitate. You shouldn't take it personally."

* * *

Mark Frasier sat alone in the little restaurant booth, silently watching steam rise from the cup of coffee before him. The door swung in with a jangle of bells. He looked up: it wasn't Lori.

He glanced at his watch and frowned.

She's late, he thought. Slackers...

Sending her home the night before had been the hardest thing he'd ever done. Quitting his job, forfeiting eight years of work, of planning and dedication, had been nothing in comparison.

Marsha Masters' attempt to manipulate him had been obvious. He hadn't chosen Love over Ambition, as Lori seemed to believe. Rather, he'd recognized a blatant attempt to break his spirit, to purchase his integrity with the promise of power.

He'd chosen autonomy, not love. Marsha Masters had tried to buy him. He'd refused. It was that simple.

But Lori's manipulation was subtle. It worked on his insides, on his deepest desires. She seemed everything he'd ever hoped to find in a woman. He didn't want to refuse or resist her. He wanted to believe she was real, that his feelings for her were genuine. He wanted to believe she shared those feelings.

But however attractive the prize, he'd realized later, long after she'd left, it was equal manipulation - and it had, in the end, become equally obvious. The contradictions were too great. The "feelings" in question were little more than pleasant fantasies when he was alone. They became real whenever Lori entered the room. They became irresistible whenever she touched him.

She was somehow creating his feelings, forcing them on him, then using them against him. It was some kind of trap, just as Marsha Masters' self-writing file had been a trap. The two things were equally alien to anything he recognized as "real." They were, most likely, equally dangerous as well.

Then the way she'd talked about collecting Chameleons. It was like listening to an entomologist praise a rare species of butterfly as he carries one, flopping and struggling, toward the killing jar. He'll preserve its beauty but not its life.

*But what if the butterfly is in love?* the strange feelings had argued. *Some things are worth dying for...*

He'd watched through the big window as Lori's car pulled away from the curb, longing to chase after her, to call her back. But with the glass between them, he'd had the sudden and disturbing impression of being inside the jar, of watching the heartless collector bustle off to seduce her next specimen.

Her next Chameleon, he'd concluded hours later - sitting quietly on the back steps, sipping coffee, watching the rising sun paint the leaves of the tall maples behind his house - her next Man. Lori did not share his feelings; he was now sure of that. She'd collect him, then move on to the next poor fool. He'd be left alone in an alien world, an endangered species on exhibit in some Slacker zoo. Or worse.

Sending Lori away had seemed an impossible task. He'd only managed it by making her promise to meet him for breakfast in the morning, to receive his answer. He'd had to be certain he would see her again, at least once, anyway, what-ever he decided.

But now, having had time to think clearly, he suspected she wouldn't much like what he had to say.

*If, that is, she decides to show up...*

He heard the jangling again and looked to the door. Lori had appeared at the front of the restaurant and was scanning the room with her eyes. He waved, and she moved toward him, smiling. She slid into the long booth seat across from him.

"Hi."

Mark felt the longing rise again within him. Lori reached for his hand, but he snatched it away. He took several deep breaths, hoping to regain control, but the feelings only got stronger.

"I want... to know...," he said between breaths, "... how you are doing this... making me feel this..."

He gasped as a burst of fire shot through his chest. The more he fought to control the surging emotions, the more the love soured, became pain.

"Please...," he panted. "Stop it... I'll die..."

"Don't fight it, Mark," Lori said. "Give in. Come with me."

Mark continued to fight, his complexion going pale as the pain that had been love now turned to nausea. He squeezed into a fetal position against the wall at the back of the booth, and covered his face with his hands, sobbed deeply into his palms.

He caught his breath. The pain eased off a little.

"There, I turned it down."

Mark dropped his hands to watch her. She was just closing a tiny heart-shaped locket that dangled from her neck on a thin silver chain. It disappeared into her blouse. Lori smiled.

"It's Pheromone Technology," she said. "The Managers have their Skills, and we have ours. It makes you Chameleons love us. It helps you to want what we want for you. It's a nonviolent Survival Skill."

"Then you've got a screwy definition of violence," Mark rasped. He sat up straight again. The feelings surged; he fought them back, cringing. "I'd rather be kicked in the head. Do you have any idea how this feels? To fall in love and find out you've been used? And that you can't stop loving? It's the worst kind of violence. You Slackers..."

As he spoke the girl's features pulled gradually tight, till she was frowning and grim. She pulled the locket again from her blouse and popped it open.

The feelings stopped. Cold.

Mark stared across the table in amazement. Not only had the feelings vanished, but Lori had changed as well. She was still cute, like any pretty blonde office-girl might be cute, but she was not

stunning. Her eyes seemed smaller. He noticed, for the first time, a small gap between her front teeth.

He wanted to get angry, to rage at the deception, but he just couldn't. When the imposed feelings had receded, so had his resistance to them. He just felt empty and tired. He felt nothing.

"Do other men fight you?" he asked.

"Not many," Lori said. "A few. I'm sorry, Mark. I never meant to hurt you. I wanted to save you."

"I saved myself."

"From the Managers, yes."

She touched his hand. Mark felt nothing. It was just a touch.

"But there are worse things out there," she continued, speaking softly. "And lots of them, Mark. There are fewer than a million true Chameleons left in a world of eight billion people. Think about that. You have probably never met another true Chameleon in your life, other than your parents - and they crossed over years ago. There are fewer and fewer true Chameleons every day. Everyone around you wants to steal your soul, to make you imitate them. Eventually, it'll tear you apart. Then you'll be gone, too."

Mark stared across the table. He bit his lower lip, frowning.

"My parents are in your world?" he asked. "I saw them die, Lori. Here. On this Earth. Your lies..."

"I have never lied to you," Lori insisted. "Everything I've told you about the state of your world is true."

"Your version of the truth, anyway. As self-serving as..."

She looked away. "And I never told you I loved you, Mark. I just never said I didn't. You assumed the rest."

Mark's emotions began to return. He felt pain. Humiliation. She was right; she hadn't lied, straight out. But she'd read the file. Allowing someone to believe what you know isn't true...

"I'm glad we rejected your Way," Mark said bitterly. "It stinks. You stink. Your whole Slacker world is like..."

Lori pulled back her hand. She touched her blouse, the spot where the locket hung invisibly.

"Turn it on and I'll kill you," Mark said, his voice calm and even. "Right here. With my bare hands. Or I'll die trying. Either way, you lose, you don't get me. Now what about my parents?"

Lori's hand dropped away from the hidden locket. She frowned, then continued as if nothing had happened.

"When I said they crossed over," she said, her voice ice, "I meant that they died. It's a common euphemism, Mark. Don't get weird on me. But they died from the stress of being Chameleons in this world."

"It's our world, you know."

"Not if they kill you all off."

"Or make us into something we're not. Like Slackers, for instance.

"But you're defenseless!" Lori pleaded. "Of all the species in the Metaverse, only you Chameleons have never developed any specialized Survival Skills. On your own..."

"I survived you pretty well," Mark said. "You under-estimate us, an apparently common misperception. I survived Marsha Masters, too, as you'll recall. I doubt she expected that."

Lori smiled - a cute, normal smile. The warmth returned to her voice.

"I suppose you're right," she said. "I'll take that as a *No*. Good luck, Mark."

She stood to leave, but Mark snatched her small hand and pulled her back. She sat again, a puzzled expression on her pretty, but not exceptional, face.

Mark leaned close. He tightened his grip on her hand.

"I thought about this all night, after you left," he said. "About why you'd be rounding us up. Why a bunch of aliens with super-advanced technology would feel a need to control us - a few defenseless, backward Chameleons. And a man who's lost everything thinks deeply, Lori. He begins to see what he's really made of..."

His lips twisted into a thin smile.

"Riddle me this, little Slacker: Does a brown Chameleon turn green, or does a green Chameleon turn brown?"

"I don't get it," Lori answered. She struggled to free her hand; Mark held on.

"Which is it," he demanded. "Is a Chameleon's true color brown, or is it green? What color is he when he's not sitting on a leaf? Is he colorless? Transparent? Do the colors beneath him just shine through his nothingness?"

"Let me go, Mark. Please."

"Green or brown!" he demanded again, squeezing her hand, twisting it. "Green or brown!"

"Both!" she shouted. Tears appeared in her eyes. "A Chameleon contains both colors, I guess. They're... They're intrinsic to its nature… Now let… me... go!"

She yanked her arm away, but Mark retained his grip. A number of heads had turned, attracted by the commotion. A waitress was approaching the table.

Mark slid out of the booth and moved to the center of the room, dragging the girl with him. Her tears were flowing freely now. They sounded real.

"Say it again!" Mark shouted. "So the audience can hear you!"

A group of busboys were gathering in front of the swinging kitchen doors, preparing to pounce.

"A Chameleon...," Lori sobbed, "... is both green and brown. Please, Mark..."

The busboys had begun to inch forward. Mark released the girl. She crumpled to the floor.

"Chameleons contain all the colors they display," Mark went on, addressing the little crowd of morning diners in a booming voice.

The onlookers remained at their tables, watching, listening. Here and there a fork dropped. A glass thudded onto a table.

"A Chameleon can only mimic colors contained in its own body chemistry," Mark continued. "Since your arrival here, we have successfully mimicked every one of your pathetic species. We have mastered all of you Ways. We have accessed all of your Survival Skills."

He took a deep breath, drawing himself up to his full and, he hoped, intimidating height.

"We contain you!" he shouted, waving a balled-up fist in the air. "We are you!"

The customers of the little restaurant were now filing past him, leaving as quickly as they could. No one raised a finger against him. They shuffled out, their faces white, their eyes to the ground.

"We contain the whole Metaverse!" Mark called after them from the doorway. "You're damned lucky we let you live this long! But we're bored now! We're sick of your incompetent meddling! Go home! Now! Or we'll kill you all at sundown! Tell your friends, you pathetic Cosmic Pansies!"

He stood in the open doorway, panting, wiping sweat from his forehead. He watched them scurry away, a pack of frightened rats, until the street was vacant.

* * *

He waited in the empty restaurant the rest of the day, watching news reports on the kitchen television, helping himself to the well-stocked freezers, making less and less frequent trips to the door to check the street outside for stragglers.

The street remained clear. No one disturbed him all day. If the news reports were genuine, it appeared they'd taken the bait. They were leaving, all of them, in one massive wave.

Mark stayed in the little restaurant till the sun hovered low over the western horizon. After all, he'd given them till sundown. Fair was fair.

A streetlight winked on outside. The sun had set. He stepped out into the pink-lit street and began a quiet, casual stroll through the deserted city. Vacant buildings rose up on all sides, some with lights left burning in the rush to escape.

But the people had vanished. They were gone.

He investigated the buildings one by one: Office towers, curio shops, food markets. He rifled through desks, employee lockers, storage rooms - searching for artifacts left behind by the fleeing aliens. He needed their tools. He needed their Skills, in case they came back, in case they ever discerned his bluff and decided to test it.

He found an empty box and slowly filled it with any device whose purpose he could not readily identify.

He crossed over the highway. The concrete below was littered with wrecked automobiles whose drivers had chosen to wink back to their own worlds in-transit, without bothering even to pull to the curb. The empty cars, still running, had rolled on until they hit something.

Or some*one*, Mark reflected. He could make out broken bodies among the metallic heaps below. They hadn't all escaped.

*Well, I warned them...*

When his box was full, he turned back toward the restaurant. As he walked, he found himself humming loudly against the unfamiliar silence surrounding him. He occupied his thoughts, taking one item after another from the box, examining it, wondering how he'd ever learn to use each device in time...

The restaurant was dark as he approached. He was certain he'd left the lights on. Something was wrong.

He set the box quietly onto the sidewalk. He took one of the alien devices - the heaviest one he could find, in case he couldn't make it work, in case he had to throw it - and moved to the door, crouching low. He threw his weight against the glass and the door heaved inward with an announcing jangle of bells. He flattened out on the tile inside, the device raised high...

A beam of intense white light pierced the interior darkness, catching him full in the face, blinding him. He rolled...

And heard laughter. Someone - a girl, by the sound of it - was laughing. Presumably, at him.

Mark crawled behind the tall lunch counter. He rubbed his eyes. A moment later, the overhead lights came on.

"Please come out, Mr. Frasier," a voice said between bursts of soft laughter. "Provided, of course, that you promise not to shoot me with... with your..." The speaker seemed to be gasping, fighting for breath, "... with your *deadly electric pencil sharpener!"*

A fresh burst of near-hysterical laughter echoed through the restaurant. Mark looked down at the device in his hand. He felt his ears burning.

So that's what it was. He'd never seen one quite like it before. But now it seemed so obvious...

He stood, intending to lunge the pencil sharpener at whatever living target he could site before being sited himself, before being gunned down by the light ray. He froze, the pencil sharpener raised.

"You..."

"Hello, Mr. Frasier."

One of his Temps - the black-haired one, the one who'd yelled at him about Lori - was sitting in a booth by the wall, her hand dropping gracefully away from the light switch to a cigarette burning in the ashtray. She chuckled softly.

"You almost had me fooled," she said. "After hearing about you on the news all day, about how you blew their cover and bluffed them right off the planet, I'd almost convinced myself you were a smart guy, after all. Thanks for being stupid. It restores my faith in first impressions."

She snatched a little flashlight from the table before her, then dropped it casually into her purse. She held up her empty hands. "No weapons," she said, then sat smoking and smiling, appearing to be quite pleased with herself.

Mark dropped the pencil sharpener and kicked it out of sight. He vaulted over the counter, sending a stool flying.

The girl burst into new fits of laughter.

"I've got a whole box of devices outside," Mark said, trying hard to muster a menacing tone. "One of them..."

"Is as useless as the next," the girl finished for him. "You've got a box of useless junk out there. But don't feel too bad. I had one just like it a few hours ago. I left mine at WorldWide."

Mark held his ground, tottering awkwardly. The next device might save him. Or he might charge the girl brandishing an egg beater, or a coffee warmer, or a...

"So what'll it be?" she said. "Slide rules at fifty paces? Or would you rather talk? Do you prefer to admit your idiocy now or later?"

Mark moved reluctantly toward the booth. He slid in across from the girl.

"I'm sorry I'm being mean to you, Mr. Frasier," she said, patting his hand. "But it feels so good. You were such a tyrant at World-Wide. It's nice to let my real feelings show."

*Real feelings.* At that, Mark smiled. "Call me Mark," he said.

The girl frowned. Her hand shot away from his own, back to the ashtray, to the glowing cigarette.

"Absolutely not," she said. "I don't want you getting any weird ideas. We are not, by a long shot, the last couple on Earth. You're not my type."

Mark leaned back and rolled his eyes up to stare at the ceiling. So this was another true Chameleon. *Jesus...*

"What exactly did you mean by *bluff*," he asked finally. "If they knew that, they'd still be here. That wasn't in any news-cast I saw."

"No, it wasn't. It was just obvious, to me, anyway. You implied we were all in on it, that all Chameleons everywhere were conspiring together against them. That we've been toying with them for thousands of years. That's what they got out of your tirade, anyway. But the newscasts were the first I'd heard of any of this. Either I was the only one not in on the Grand Conspiracy, or it was all a big bluff. I opted for bluff."

She ground out the cigarette. She was smiling again.

"You should have seen them, Mr. Frasier. I was at work when the alarm sounded. They went nuts. They panicked, running around, throwing things, using their weird devices on each other, screaming about Survival. Between that and the newscasts, I figured out their Survival Skills thing pretty quickly. Once they'd all left, I sifted through the wreckage, looking for devices they might have left, things I could use to defend myself if they came back. Then it hit me."

"What," Mark said, suddenly tense. "What hit you?"

"The devices," she said. "I couldn't pick them out from the rest of the junk. They're disguised as other things. Perfectly disguised. I was looking for things that didn't fit, that seemed alien, but everything seemed perfectly natural to a big office - computers, telephones, files..."

"Files," Mark echoed. "Marsha Masters had this file that..."

"That reported your every move. I know. I ransacked her office and found one on me, too. I destroyed both our files. You were a real sap for that Slacker, Lori. I told you she was bad news."

Mark let the comment slide. "Well, the files prove that we can recognize at least some of their devices. Eventually..."

"You're not getting this, are you?" she cut in, her voice sharp. "Think, Mr. Frasier, think. Their devices are perfectly disguised as other things. They mimic other things. And they - the aliens - built them. In designing their tools, they mimicked us. They mastered our Way. Which they could only have done..."

"If they contain us." Now he understood. He frowned. "If they're as much Chameleon as we are Slacker or Manager or Pimp."

Mark Frasier drew a slow breath.

"Christ," he whispered. "I hope they never figure it out."

The girl stood and snatched her purse off the table.

"Well, I, for one, am not waiting around till they do," she said. "I'm going to find the others. There are, according to the news, some 900,000 of us floating around the planet. They'll have TV's and radios."

"Wait," he said. "I'll go with you."

She was already out the door. He moved to the street and watched her bustling away, rushing off toward the distant WBBX transmitter, its red eye winking softly in the nighttime sky.

Well, Mark thought, at least she's no Slacker...

He hurried after her.

# Missing Time

He found himself behind the house, smoking in the dark, waiting for the possums. They came about this time every night, around 9:00 PM, to feast on table scraps and garbage he put out to draw them close. They relied on him for food, as he relied on them for company. He shared with the possums a secret affection that his neighbors would not have appreciated, had they been aware. *Giant rats*, the old man next door called them. He mixed poison nightly into his spiteful trash, and had managed to take out a few real rats that way, as well as many innocent birds and the occasional alley cat. But never a possum. They were wise, discerning creatures, rulers of night's hidden landscape, slow to human contact, and faithful to their few well-chosen friends.

So it was not strange that he was here this night, out on the plastic lawn chair, hearing the nocturnal shuffle begin in the trees as possums, one by one, stretched awake, uncurled ropey tails, and dropped gracelessly into the underbrush behind the garage. What was unusual was *finding* himself there, opening his eyes on this scene, when what seemed only a moment before, he remembered them closing around the bright rush hour highway, heading west, heading home, the glare on the windshield burning his eyes toward sleep, and he remembered thinking, *Just a nap…*

And now he was *here*, in the yard, nearly four hours later, with no memory to explain his presence, no story as to how he'd gotten from *there* to *here*. He supposed he should count himself lucky to have made it home at all.

* * *

The possums were coming. City possums, fat and pampered. He could hear them marching fearlessly through the scrub; they knew he was there, had smelled him from the trees. Any moment, a spearpoint nose would test the air between the brick corner of the garage and the giant plastic pot his wife had left on the driveway in her rush to get away. She was moving to an apartment, wouldn't have room, could he…? He'd killed the plant with inattention and let its corpse stand as a monument. The possums liked the pot, hid behind it when the neighbor's dog came yapping on the other side of the high fence, calmly chewing biscuits or tuna casserole in the darkness until the old man came yelling, cursing the beast for remembering its dogness, for taking an interest in life beyond his cloistered compound. And the moment the door snapped shut on that tucked, neutered tail, they were back for more, diving ravenously into the lighted circle where he'd placed his nightly offering, into bananas and cornbread, garlic pasta and fried chicken. They were cautious creatures, but never picky.

* * *

He was expecting a march, a real possum parade. First around the corner would be Roswell, then her many babies. She counted on him, on his unflagging generosity, to sustain them. When the brood scampered into view behind her, he would smile.

He'd named her Roswell because of her uncanny, gray resemblance to the aliens supposedly captured when their spaceship crashed in New Mexico in 1947. He'd seen artist's renderings on TV, a botched, faked autopsy film that made headlines, but no real sense. He knew aliens, and that bleeding thing on the table simply wasn't one. As a kid, he used to pray to the aliens—the ethereal, kindly *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* aliens—to come and take him away from his inescapable family, his cruel father, all booze and fists and terror, his beloved, fragile sister he was too young to protect, his cold mother, her back forever turned to the atrocities going on in her own home. Aliens were angels, beings of light, and no bureaucracy would ever touch one, let alone dissect it like some

bug. Besides, one didn't need those huge, wrap around eyes to see in the dark of space; that was pure Hollywood. He knew the night even better than he knew aliens, or even possums, and what one needs in the dark is a keen sense of smell. The TV aliens didn't even have noses, just holes in their faces. Roswell's pinpoint eyes were sufficient; she saw with smell, could tell a friend from a predator a city block from where a sight-dependent creature like Man would be dinner.

* * *

For years, he'd watched his wife with his eyes. Watched her leave for work, leave to visit friends, leave to volunteer at the City Botanical Garden, so close to the apartment of her newfound male *just friend* coworker. He should have smelled her for sex, for the dirty fetor of men, for the aura of lies and betrayal that would have triggered Roswell's radar a mile away, alerting her, wisely, to dodge the attack, to immediately sprint to a safe, dark place.

He'd stood that final evening in the dangerous sunlight, watching her back down the driveway, her car loaded to bursting with things no longer his. As the sun set and darkness fell, he was still standing there, afraid of the empty house, relieved to surrender vision as the night embraced him in its black, enveloping wings.

And suddenly, beyond reason, he could smell her. All the way across town. He could smell her laughter, her exhilarating freedom, her relief to have so easily escaped witnessing the devastation she'd left in her wake. For an instant, he thought he smelled uncertainty, regret, but it vanished when her scent spiraled off on a breeze, then came back vibrant again, mixed now with something heavy, yet strangely familiar… the *just friend*. She would not be back. He could smell it.

That was the night he'd met Roswell.

* * *

She appeared around the corner right on schedule and paused, her nose twitching in the air, carefully locating him in the darkness, the food laid out on the blacktop. He could hear the babies closing in behind her, navigating the leaves he'd never bothered to rake, the piled twigs and branches what winter ice there'd been had brought down from the trees. Apparently satisfied that all was right, she took a fix on the night's libation and waddled out into the light.

She was beautiful. He never tired of the feral caution in her gradual approach, the transfiguration of her camouflage gray into radiant silver under the halogen spotlight, her efficient razor teeth rendering soft fruits and tough meats with equal, hungry fervor. His heart joined her scraping rhythm as she worked to strip a ham bone of its last pink vestige. He held his breath as she raised her maternal head when the babies filed out, climbing playfully over one another's backs, already fat and spoiled, tumbling to be first in line at the feast when their mother gave the command.

Then all at once he smelled it—something heavenly, something so out of place among the earthy mix of mud and possum and aging food that his whole body spasmed against it. His sudden movement froze the possums in their places. They rose as one on their round haunches, noses to the breeze. They smelled it, too: *Cookies. Cinnamon*. The air turned suddenly warm around him, and he, too, rose, allowing the sweet and somehow dangerous scent to turn him slowly around until he faced the house, the dark, back window, the black, lifeless kitchen that had once been her domain, his wife's joyful sanctum, the room from which she had spun enchantments in exotic soups and breads, in stews and roasts that spoke a secret, sacred language he had suffered long to unlearn.

She was there. He could smell her, like some vague vanilla shadow floating impossibly beyond the window. Hovering by the stove. Singing to herself; he could hear her now.

He closed his eyes against the vision, against this too-present ghost, this unbeckoned resurgence of sweetness long ago traded for the gall of despair. He didn't want to remember these feelings, hated himself for coming so suddenly alive, cursed the long-

untended ember of joy being fanned to painful brilliance within him with each fragrant breath.

He was glowing now, erupting pale fire, slicing the shadows around him with spinning blades of radiant silver light. As the night released him, the light lifted him up, out of the yard, over the house, then east toward the dawn and a vision of his missing four hours:

He saw the crash, heard a sound like thunder that startled him awake on the highway, a distant crackle as the steering wheel entered his chest, then lights from above: blue, then red, then blue again, strobing, a frantic, whispered child's prayer—followed by black, enveloping wings and, finally, inexplicably, the musky, familial smell of possums.

# Friendly Fire

Jim Parish lost the war at exactly 10:00 PM, on January 12, 1998, the evening of his 35th birthday.

He had suspected for some time that a bomb was slowly ticking away inside him, a device planted years before, probably all the way back in 1991, when he'd come home from the Persian Gulf a hero and married Susan, the girl of his dreams, only to find himself suddenly transformed in her eyes, as sometimes happens in the flashback nightmares of vets, into a gook, a towel-head, from the beloved comrade he longed to be to Susan into an unwilling marital combatant—*The Enemy*.

He'd never understood the transformation. He had really tried to be a good husband—caring, thoughtful, hardworking, kind. But somehow, under Susan's defensive gaze, every caring act became a declaration of war, every thoughtful gesture a trick, work was betrayal, a cowardly retreat from the field of battle, kindness a subterfuge behind which surely lurked manipulation, twisted mind games cruelly intended to confine her with dependence, to rob her of her precious freedom and individuality.

It was clear to him early on that Susan resented being married to him, being married at all (as if he had somehow made that decision for her), and that the expectation of intimacy, commitment, sharing represented, in her eyes, a kind of emotional prison. Susan saw herself as a POW of married life, and she'd made it her mission, it seemed from the very beginning, to escape.

He could have accepted that, then, in the beginning, if she had simply gone. But she'd wanted the victory. It was not enough for her to tunnel out of the marriage through years of affairs, betrayals and lies. She'd had to make sure he would not survive—to come

after her, he supposed, and mete out justice in some post-marital war crimes tribunal.

So, on her way out, she'd laid mines in every corner of his psyche, mines that went off around him at every turn, every time he flipped through a photo album, passed a restaurant they used to frequent, or found himself confronted with a TV ad featuring that model who looked so much like her, hawking that ridiculously expensive shampoo she had always insisted was a basic necessity of life.

Each subtly-hidden tripwire seemed to announce itself just a moment too late, when the split second needed to avoid the explosion had just irrevocably passed.

*I can still get you*, they seemed to whisper, just beneath the threshold of his conscious awareness.

Then *boom*.

He would never have denied her the shampoo, or anything else, for that matter. He'd wanted her to be happy. But none of that mattered now. She was gone, out of the picture, free. More accurately, *he* was out of *her* picture. She remained a ghostly presence in his, inhabiting the shadows of his solitary world, a mental sniper firing from empty trees, an emotional SCUD salvo nightly polishing the desert sands of his dreams into hot, black glass.

Since they had finally separated, four months to the day before his 35th birthday, his life alone had been a series of explosions which he was sure she could hear, if not see from her distant fortress of freedom on the far side of town. And he suspected that hearing those *booms* in the night brought her great satisfaction.

He had learned, in time, not to look at old pictures, not to go out, to leave the TV a black and silent sentry standing guard against invasion from the hostile, Susan-infected world around him. He had slowly built up his own fortress of isolation, a lonely but safe haven against a reality she'd imprinted with herself the way Roman Legions once worked salt into conquered soil, sterilizing the landscape against any hope of future life.

It was in that lifeless fortress that he'd first heard the ticking. It was coming from his chest, so, at first, he mistook the sound for his own heartbeat. But in the dream-sweat predawn stillness, after weeks

of careful listening, he was certain he'd picked out a distinct counterpoint—*Tick, tick—bubump. Tick, tick—bubump*. The bomb was lodged in his heart, all right, so cleverly placed and timed that if he hadn't drawn within himself, had moved forward with his life as friends and coworkers had all so cheerfully insisted he should, he would never have discovered it.

Somewhere very early on, probably on their wedding night so many years before, she had carried out a terrible, covert operation, and planted her failsafe doomsday weapon deep inside him—not just in his mind, but in his body itself. The mental mines had never been intended to kill him. To punish him, surely, to push him to the edge of madness and surrender, no doubt, but he now realized that their true, secret purpose had been to distract him, to keep him spooked and jumpy and unaware of her real strategy, to keep his attention focused on the daily battle for survival until her master plan could be fulfilled, and the war would be hers.

He considered himself lucky. He knew Susan's pyrotechnic style all too well, and so he felt certain that this bomb, like her many small mines, would require a trigger. It would tick away benignly inside him until some prearranged event in the environment came along to set it off.

He had a chance. All he had to do to live was to let nothing in, to seal himself away absolutely, to cut himself off so completely from life that nothing foreign or dangerous or surprising could ever reach him.

To live, he only had to die to the world.

* * *

The letter that arrived on his 35th birthday did not come as a surprise. It was from his Persian Gulf platoon leader, Fred Martin, a man only a year older than himself, but a born officer, a man he'd followed into and out of combat, ate, slept and killed beside, shoulder to shoulder during that brief desert conflict. He'd written to Fred soon after the separation began, shared with him a dutiful report of the whole marital firefight, seeking the solace and advice

of someone he respected, someone not Susan, of a man who had been like a brother to him in crisis, a steady and reliable center amidst the chaotic swirl of battle.

Fred's wife had left him two weeks before he'd shipped out to Saudi. She'd been, to hear Fred tell it, a vindictive, heartless bitch. He'd last seen Fred the day he'd accepted his honorable discharge to pursue what he'd imagined would be a life of domestic civilian bliss. Fred had kept the uniform, climbed the military ladder, made a career of war and discipline. He had never remarried, never really healed from the original loss. In the end, they'd turned out to have more in common than Jim Parish could ever have expected. If he was going to reach out to anyone for support, for a stabilizing hand, Fred Martin had seemed the natural choice. He'd known Fred would respond. He had counted on it.

But that had been at the beginning, when he still had hope, before he had discovered the ticking bomb within him, before he'd begun the necessary routine of cutting himself off, of living without a telephone, of throwing away all intrusive mail, immediately, unopened. Communication of any kind was out of the question. His survival depended on it.

But the letter's army base postmark, the crisp, military format of the return address, had called out to him, practically ordering him to be brave, to take the risk, to not easily surrender the hill of this proffered gift of respite and companionship to the fears entrenched in siege around him.

He brought the letter inside, let it sit, unopened, all day on the kitchen counter, visiting it periodically throughout the day, checking it for booby-traps, fixing it with a quick, backward glance each time he left the room to see if hidden enemies might slink like Trojan soldiers from beneath its seductively sealed fold. By evening, he had almost convinced himself that it had to be safe, that surely on this, his 35th birthday, he had earned some relief from his unfair, forced exile. It seemed only right. And Fred was, after all, his friend, his leader, his comrade in arms. If he could trust anyone in all the world, it was surely Fred Martin, a man of integrity and honor.

At 9:57, he opened the letter.

For three glorious minutes, he basked in his friend's kind concern, the intimate details of Fred's own failed marriage, his words of encouragement, even an invitation to reenlist, to escape back into the arms of a system that still considered him a hero, where he would always have a home, could always find companions who understood and cared.

But as the hallway clock struck the hour, the letter took a dangerous philosophical turn:

*The question we have to ask ourselves*, Fred wrote, *is this:*

*Are you and I fucked up because our wives left us?*

*Or did our wives leave us because we're fucked up?*

Jim Parish experienced a moment of complete and terrible silence in which he heard neither the ticking of the bomb nor his own heartbeat.

He had underestimated her cleverness.

*Boom*.

# Mercuria, Rising

Like the secret-identitied men beneath the masks of all the great Golden Age superheroes, Linda Herman had two first names. She felt especially proud that her last name, her second first name, was a man's first name, just like that of her great childhood heroine, Diana Duke, A.K.A., *Amazing Woman*. Like that glorious Amazon princess who left her island of women warriors to purify the man-corrupted outside world, Linda Herman had escaped her family in tiny Paradise, New Mexico, to bring her own brand of justice to the corrupt city of men and machinery, of skyscrapers and mall-lights that all her young life had glistened on the horizon of her dry small town landscape like a beckoning dewdrop: *Albuquerque*. And though she'd been born Linda Ballwin, a decidedly unempowering name by her reckoning, her marriage to big city lawyer Steve Herman had been more than her one way ticket out of Paradise - it had, by chance or by fate, granted her a secret identity worthy of the epic pantheon she now counted herself among.

By day she was Linda Herman, mild mannered cashier at the Mobile Gas & Wash on Highway 25. By night she was *Mercuria*, shape-shifter extraordinaire - and this very night, Mercuria would face the greatest challenge of her career.

* * *

"Forget it. I'm out." She tried to squeeze a note of sympathy into her voice, but her anticipation of the coming showdown blocked its path like an icy lump behind her tongue. Poor Sid. So worked up over a game.

"This makes three weeks running." Sid's voice burned through the telephone. "Keep this up and we'll have to kill off your character. Just to keep the game going." He sounded more hurt than angry. Such whiners, her role-playing boys. They were hungry for her presence. She could feel their need emanating through the line, hear them clattering around in the background like awkward teenagers, although the youngest among them was twenty-five. Somebody was passing out beers, clanking the bottles together noisily. A voice taking pizza orders. "She's not coming," Sid called back to the room. She heard a great, communal moan, a quiet, "Well, fuck her, then."

She cradled the receiver against her shoulder and stared out the gleaming station window as through the transparent wall of a glass airplane. That's what they all wanted, to fuck her. It was her greatest power, one that seemed to flow naturally from the masculine last first name. Men wanted her, and she had learned to use their desire as a dog trainer used treats and punishment to command obedience. She could disarm any man with a smile, a lingering gaze. She could lasso him into submission with the cold turn of a shoulder as effectively as a yanked slip-chain could bring a dog to heel.

She relaxed and let the power ooze out toward Sid, right through the phone line. She imagined it washing over him in waves, reclaiming him as the ocean reclaims a sandcastled beach at high tide. "*Sidney*, dear," she said, wrapping her tongue tenderly around his name, "Tonight I really have no choice. It's Steve's sister's wedding. I'm a bridesmaid, for Christ's sake. I'll be with you next week, I promise." She could have said she'd be at the game next week. *I'll be with you* offered the treat.

"Does Steve know where you were last week?" His turning from the bait pissed her off and she yanked the lasso tight. She heard a soft gasp, his breath quickening.

"*You* don't know where I was last week, *Sid*." This time she split the word with her teeth and heard him moan. She dropped the receiver onto the counter and stared out again through the window, out across the overpass to the setting sun's reflection like an angry red eye, watching her from the towering mirrored spire of All Souls Church, where the wedding, and the great test of her powers,

awaited her. The receiver buzzed beside her arm as Sid poured out his apologies to the dirty red Formica. When the buzzing stopped, she raised the phone again to her ear. Sid was still on the line; she could hear his shallow breathing. She imagined him sitting there in the cluttered apartment, eyes lowered in submission, awaiting her command.

"I'll be with you next week," she said again, tossing the treat this time to ensure Sid's loyalty.

"Next week. Okay, Linda. Thanks."

Why were men so sensitive? It was as if in cheating on Steve, she was cheating on Sid as well. They weren't even friends, Steve and Sid. Steve the lawyer husband considered himself above everyone she knew. He trusted her to spend every Saturday night, all night, with Sid and the other role-playing boys because he considered them nerds, computer geeks incapable of offering him any real competition. In a sense, he was right. Though she led them on constantly, she would never actually sleep with Sid or any of the other gamers. They *were* nerds, all of them, still pimpled in their twenties, pathetically excited by their nine to five jobs writing code or repairing PCs for Motorola, wasting their fat paychecks on pizza and beer and endlessly complicated games filled with dragons they would never see, shapely wenches they would never hold, heroic deeds they would never, ever perform in real life.

But in a very real sense, Steve was wrong, too. Sid and the boys had led her to the realization of her true powers and identity. After marrying Steve and moving to Albuquerque, she'd gone months in a strange city with nothing but time on her hands. She'd met Sid while combing the aisles of a used bookstore, one surprisingly heavy on old comics. She was rifling gleefully through a rack of plastic-wrapped, vintage Amazing Woman originals when she'd found her arms dropping under the weight of what she was crazily certain in the moment were heavy, bullet-deflecting bracelets. There'd been nothing on her wrists that she could see, but she'd continued to feel their weight. When she'd felt her spine straightening and her breasts lifting as if confined to a stiff bodice, she'd spun around to find Sid standing bulkily behind her, close but not

touching, his wide eyes shifting slowly from her face to the Amazing Woman #200 she still held in her lowered hands, then back again to her face.

"You look just like her," he'd said.

She'd laughed then, struck silly by the honesty in his voice as his brown boy scout eyes surveyed her tiny body, her thin, blonde hair, and saw Amazing Woman in all her busty, brunette glory. The laugh erupted from some deep, hidden place within her, rising up and through her like a white-capped river of real Amazon power, flooding her whole, piercing some invisible barrier within - and for the very first time, she'd heard the sound that would forever change her life: *Swisha-bodda-whoosh!*, like water rushing over sharp stones, and there she'd stood, Amazing Woman, her body tall and muscled, her waves of chocolate brown hair held in check by a golden tiara, her sweatshirt and jeans replaced by Old Glory recreated in garish red, white and blue spandex. Then *swish-bodda-whoosh!*, and she was back to herself again, just like that. She'd stood there, stunned, her skin tingling, alive with power, her body glowing with the raw physical delight of the transformation she'd experienced as a whirlpool inside her spinning cold water up into hard three-dimensional form, as if Amazing Woman had been inside her all along and had, for that brief moment, chosen to leap out, an ice sculpture inverted into hot, living flesh.

Sid had seen it, too. "Holy shit," he'd said, then, "Come on. Let's get out of here." No one in the shop gave them a second look as they paid for their comics and headed out to the street. It had, apparently, been a private revelation, just between them.

She'd followed him back to his rathole apartment, her mind still swimming in the ecstatic afterglow, and she'd almost made love to him right there on top of the piled comic books, pizza boxes and stray computer parts that seemed to cover every horizontal surface in the place. But just as his thick fingers were prying at the top button of her jeans, she'd thought of Steve the lawyer husband, who she was already growing to dislike, but toward whom she had still, then, felt, if not loyalty, exactly, at least a certain sense of obligation. She'd panicked, grown desperate to push the hulking Sid away,

when *Swisha-bodda-whoosh!*, she'd swirled outward again, this time not as Amazing Woman, but as a sleek, hissing reptile, a curvaceous lizardwoman with taloned claws and dripping five inch fangs. Sid was at least twice her own weight, but she'd flung him across the room as easily as a rejected toy, raking furrows into his soft arms and back that painted crimson stripes down the far wall as he hit it hard, then slid to the carpet in a crumpled heap.

*Swisha-bodda-whoosh!*, and she was herself again, rushing to his side. The cuts weren't bad, playful scratches, really. But Sid had been in a hurry to get past her, to run to the bathroom to clean himself up. He was honest enough to admit that he'd come in his pants mid-fling, overwhelmingly aroused by her arcane transformation into Demonia Rex, a particularly nasty supervillian she'd never heard of, but who apparently played a central role in Sid's twisted fantasy life. It had been her first clear insight into the sexual depths of her newfound powers.

They'd spent the rest of that afternoon and most of the evening testing her abilities, Sid digging through old comic books, displaying one character after another, Linda spinning them from her body, becoming superheroes and villains, beautiful and terrifying otherworldly creatures, once even a 5' 3" perfect replica of the control panel from the Integrity Team of America's space station floating in its 22,300 mile geostationary orbit over New York City.

As she was preparing to leave, simultaneously exhausted and exhilarated, Sid had suggested she join him and his friends in a superhero role-playing game, a long running campaign he would design specifically to explore the nature and limits of her powers in a variety of situations, to help her gain insight into and real control over the transformation process. She'd suspected Sid really just wanted to show her off to his friends, but she'd agreed, sensing that over the course of the afternoon she had come to own Sid as one owns a pet, a wholly dependent animal. He'd been neutered, made safe. It seemed unlikely that Sid's friends would present any more of a challenge, but the practice really might do her good.

Her character for the game would need a name, a colorful superhero title. The quicksilver nature of the change, shapes and faces and

costumes morphing one into the other like a living liquid metal made the choice obvious - *Mercuria*, in fantasy and reality, had been born into the world.

When she'd pulled into the driveway, Steve had been there to meet her, had opened the car door and blocked her exit.

"Where the hell have you been? It's after ten o'clock."

She'd slid across the seat and out the passenger door. "I'm sorry, *Daddy*," she'd said across the top of the car. "Did I miss my curfew?" She'd moved around the hood and faced him boldly, shoulders thrown back, imagining with glee the wild silhouette she must have cut with the garage light behind her. She'd thrown her arms wide. "Curfew this, asshole!"

Nothing happened. She'd pictured Demonia Rex, Ebony Orchid, Tiger Queen. She'd called desperately on her Amazon heritage, begged Amazing Woman to appear. No *Swisha-bodda-whoosh!*, no startling transformation. The silence had finally broken with Steve's laughter.

"Are you drunk?" He was smiling. "You're drunk," he'd said, then laughed again. And she'd let him believe it, let him lead her into the house, put her to bed with a scolding like a rebellious teenager.

"Sleep it off," he'd said as he crawled into the bed beside her, not touching her. "We'll talk in the morning."

They never did really talk. Over breakfast, he'd suggested she get a job, find something constructive to fill her free time. She'd told him about meeting Sid, about the recurring Saturday night game. Steve had thought it a fine idea. She needed to make new friends.

"Just lay off the booze," he'd said, pausing on his way out the door. "I can't afford an alcoholic wife. You're part of my reputation. Don't fuck it up."

She'd watched through the window as his car backed out of the driveway and disappeared around the corner. Then she'd called Sid. It had become suddenly and abundantly clear to her that Linda Herman and Mercuria were two very different creatures who would have to lead two very separate lives. Her hands were shaking as she punched Sid's number into the phone. *Super powers. A secret life.* The liberation and limitless possibility behind those words played tag up

and down her spine like an alternating current, charging her new identity to a pulsating reality that made the woman she had been just the morning before a mere phantom, a necessary lie to be maintained only as a cover for who or what she had become. When Sid answered, his voice trembling with fear and lust and hunger, she'd seen the world laid out before her like one vast, sensual smorgasbord, free for the sampling. Though she had called him, she'd made Sid beg her to come over, just because she could.

* * *

The first time she'd managed the transformation outside the context of the game, beyond Sid's watchful gaze, had been at church. The Friday before, she'd been half-asleep behind the gas station counter when the bells over the door jangled, and the most beautiful man she had ever seen appeared before her as if stepping from a dream. He was tall, firmly built, with wavy brown hair and piercing green eyes that seemed to be observing her a little warily, as if from an intentionally safe distance. In his tweed jacket and open-collared shirt he'd looked like a young college professor - not as young as herself, probably in his late thirties, but young for his profession. English, she'd guessed, maybe philosophy.

"Michael Damron," he'd introduced himself. "Father Mike. Am I anywhere near All Souls Parish?"

The most beautiful man she had ever seen was a priest. She'd looked again and noticed a streak of gray amidst the brown waves. A distinguished gray, she'd decided, adjusting his likely age to early forties, mid-forties tops. But he was still beautiful; his apparent inaccessibility made him seem even more so. She'd felt the power rising, straight up from her groin.

"The church or the whole parish?" She'd hooked his eyes with her own, sent a little spark across the connection.

"The church will do," he'd said, smiling, sending back a charge that caressed her spine like dancing raindrops.

She'd had to look away to maintain control. A bead of sweat snaked coldly down one leg, underneath her jeans. When she'd looked up

again, a matching line had appeared on Father Mike's face, tracing a curving path around his nose and onto his lip, where he touched it lightly with his tongue before wiping it away with a clean, white handkerchief.

"It's a hot one," he'd said, now avoiding her gaze.

*"Mmhm."* She'd let a little of the power slide out along the hummed syllables, then dammed it up behind an icy wall of teasing indifference. "Cross the highway," she'd instructed. "Right on the outer road. Three blocks."

He'd looked to the door, and then back to her. "I'm the new assistant priest. I hope to see you on Sunday."

"Sorry, not Catholic." She was pushing him away now, enlarging the wall of ice until it stood between them like a swelling glass wave.

"Give it a chance," he'd said as he backed toward the door. "It's the most fun you'll ever have with your clothes on."

His very un-priestly parting shot had pissed her off, so Sunday morning she was in the front row, wearing a low-cut black dress, four inch spike heels, and earrings made of sparkling faceted mirrors that reflected the altar lights right onto the pulpit when she turned her head just so. To introduce the new assistant priest to the congregation, Father Mike had been assigned the first reading, a passage from the Song of Solomon:

"How beautiful are your feet in sandals, O Prince's daughter," he'd intoned, his voice a musical, lush baritone. "Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the handiwork of an artist. Your navel is a round bowl that should never lack for mixed wine. Your body is a heap of wheat encircled with lilies. Your breasts are twin fawns, the young of a gazelle..."

He was staring right down her open dress as he spoke. She'd crossed and uncrossed her bare legs, shifted in her seat to give him a better view. A reflected rainbow from hear earrings danced across his face.

"Your neck is like a tower of ivory. Your eyes are like the pools in Heshbon..."

The power erupted: *Swisha-bodda-whoosh!*, and she was Solomon's bride, bedecked in splendor, breasts free and heaving as she felt herself standing, swaying forward, reaching out to touch him...

Father Mike stopped reading, made a strangled coughing noise, begged the congregation's pardon as he shot away from the pulpit and disappeared into the vestry.

*Swisha-bodda-whoosh!*, and she was back in the pew, black dress tight around her, crossing her legs firmly now against the smell of sex rising from her soaked panties. A bustle had broken out as the senior priest ordered the second reader prematurely to the microphone and the congregation gossiped busily about their strange new hire, but no one had seemed to notice anything unusual about her. As with Sid in the bookstore, it had been a private show, just between them.

They'd become lovers the following Saturday night when, just as she was about to lock up the station and head over to Sid's, Father Mike pulled in driving a long, green station wagon still loaded with boxes he had yet to unpack. They'd done it right there, standing in front of the dark gas pumps, then again in her car, since his was full. They'd lain curled together for a long time, watching the stars through the curving backseat window, the pale moon rising hungry over the highway, when she'd decided to toss him one last treat before sending him home, just to ensure that she owned him - not like poor neutered Sid, but like a favored toy she might return to for pleasure again and again. She'd taken him into her mouth, moved her wet lips up and down, slowly at first, then faster, harder, but he would not rise to her touch. Finally, he'd pushed her gently away.

"I think I'm spent," he'd said, shyly. "I'm sorry, but I really have to go. I have a homily to write."

She'd rolled up onto her knees and smiled down at him. "Maybe this will help," then *Swisha-bodda-whoosh!*, the Blessed Virgin Mary whirled into being, blue robes flowing, a gleaming silver halo floating in the air above her. She'd dropped her head again to his lap and found him rock hard, alive in her mouth. He came instantly, then shoved her away, slamming her into the far door.

"You whore!" He was shaking violently, pulling his scattered clothes to him, grabbing frantically behind him for the door handle. He'd rolled out onto the pavement, naked, his wadded pants clutched before him like a shield. "Whore!" he'd shouted again and again as he scrambled to his station wagon, fumbled the key into the ignition. "Whore! Whore!" as he'd skidded onto the highway and vanished into the night.

* * *

She'd missed every Saturday game since that night with Father Mike, perfecting her transformative skills on her own, expanding her sphere of influence until she owned the Mobile station manager, Sid's boss at Motorola, the mayor's son, Paul, who let her drive his fully-restored '68 Mustang as fast as she wanted on the dark back roads, and, most recently, Steve's sister's fiancé, Reggie, a hopeless romantic for whom she became a graceful, white swan, a frail southern belle, a fig-leafed Eve stealing his innocence in the walled garden behind his magnificent three story house - a house he would soon share with Steve's frigid sister, a woman she was growing to hate as much as she had gradually come to hate Steve, the one man in all Albuquerque seemingly immune to her powers.

She liked Reggie, really liked him, and she had come to realize that she wanted him to really like her back - not just belong to her the way Sid and the others did, but to like her for her, to like Linda Herman, and not simply lust after Mercuria. But like the others, he was under her spell, mesmerized by Mercuria's superhuman allure. Was that all there would ever be between them? Would he welcome the revelation of the woman behind the mask? She had, herself, leaped blindly into Mercuria's exhilarating world to escape that woman's gray life. Would things be any different with Reggie? Could Linda Herman be any more real or special or important to Reggie than she had been to Steve? To herself?

She blew a kiss to the station manager, who had come in himself to make sure she got the evening off, stuffed the awful teal dress onto the passenger seat, then laughed, a little sadly, from that deep,

hidden place as she turned the key and gunned the car out into traffic.

Love and super powers had never been very successfully mixed, at least in the two-dimensional realm of the comics. The obvious hubris of believing such things should work differently for her, just because she was her, grated quietly at the hidden pillars of her self-confidence, but she brushed the feelings aside and forced her eyes to take in the road ahead. She'd have to sort out the personal stuff later. Right now, Mercuria had a wedding to stop.

The narrow entranceway was jammed as tuxedoed groomsmen fought their way through a hoop-skirted, teal obstacle course to line up for the processional. Someone knocked over a little table of programs that scattered like snow under their shoes. Steve, Reggie's Best Man, slid past her without a glance to man his post beside the teary-eyed Maid of Honor. Reggie was already at the front beside Father Mike, awaiting their entrance. Handel's *Coro* began in the distance.

Steve hooked the Maid of Honor's arm and started down the aisle. When her turn came, Linda followed, arm in arm with Reggie's brother or cousin or friend, a plain body in a tuxedo whose name she hadn't bothered to ask, even sitting next to him at the rehearsal dinner. She didn't look at him now. She kept her eyes straight ahead, fixed on Reggie.

Reggie was watching her, too, his eyes filled with a dreamy hunger she knew Steve's sister could never feed. As she baby-stepped forward in slow time to the music, she felt Reggie's eyes on her, eyes finding her from every corner of the room, male eyes, and then the power swirling up from her groin, electrifying her skin. The moment had arrived.

*Swisha-bodda-whoosh!*, and she was an elegant, woman-sized swan, all curving neck and ivory wings, exuding sweet perfume as she glided toward Reggie's opening arms.

But the arms weren't opening to receive her. They were reaching for Steve, turning him around, cupping an ear. Steve's gaze hit her like a shotgun blast. *Swisha-bodda-whoosh!*, and the graceful bird exploded in a spray of bloody feathers. The teal dress was back,

suddenly dingy, threads loose at the seams, a full shade paler than the dresses around her, like a wash and wear hand-me-down washed one too many times.

*What?* Steve was mouthing silently. Reggie shrugged, raised an empty hand. The hunger in his eyes was mixed now with pale confusion, jittery fear, but his gaze stayed fixed loyally on her. The moment Steve's attention wavered, she felt the power returning.

Father Mike stared down into the black cover of his Bible as she turned after the first row of pews and followed the other bridesmaids into line. She was standing less than four feet away. He would have to acknowledge her eventually, but she had nothing special in store for him today, or ever again, as far as she was concerned. He was no longer beautiful. He seemed to have aged decades since she'd last seen him. Scowling in his pastoral robes, he looked like any bitter celibate performing a ceremony whose fruits he would never personally taste - to his parishioners knowledge, anyway.

There was a break in the music, then the first chords of Mendelssohn's *Wedding March* sent the stained glass windows humming in their panes. The congregation stood as one and turned to face the wide rear doors.

And like water swirling down a rusted metal tub, Mercuria sunk through her feet into the floor, leaving her groin an empty hollow, her skin numb and lifeless beneath the off-teal dress. The power was gone. She suddenly couldn't imagine what she had hoped to accomplish with the swan, with showing up for the wedding at all. To make Reggie love her? To drive him to call off the wedding? To bring him running down the aisle to her side on his own wedding day, in front of God and Steve and two families who would never forgive him? Thanks to Steve, whatever naïve expectations she'd had coming in were blown. And she hadn't made a Plan B. Steve glanced over, and she smiled back wanly, feeling bland and stupid and alone.

The bride was already front and center. Her gray, tuxedoed father placed her hand into Reggie's, then slipped into a seat.

"Dearly beloved," Father Mike began, his voice thin, harsher than she recalled, "We are gathered here today in the sight of God to witness the joining of Reggie Andrews and Christina Herman in the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony."

Linda Andrews, she thought. If it had been her up there, she would still have had two first names. She looked at Reggie looking at his bride with eyes she'd never seen and knew she was losing him. Mercuria or no Mercuria, she had to do something.

"The Sacrament of Marriage is a solemn and lifelong commitment, not to be entered into lightly. If there is anyone among you who has reason to protest this union, let him speak now or forever hold his peace."

*Now*. She had to act now. She cleared her throat in the solemn silence and opened herself to the power, begged Mercuria to rise up and through her, to return and take her whole. "I object," she said, her voice as dry and fragile as a moth's powdery wings.

Every eye in the church turned on her, and the power exploded like a geyser from her skin. *Swisha-bodda-whoosh!*, and massive silver chains spun out of her own arms and legs, binding her, dragging her down and forward under their terrible weight. Steve's hateful stare painted the shining links teal, but too many eyes were on her, pulling her in a hundred directions. She crashed into the altar, scattering wafers like shaved ice. *Swisha-bodda-whoosh!*, and she became a Japanese Geisha, a slave bound in stocks, a beaten, bleeding witch strapped to a smoldering stake. Men's eyes had always made her beautiful, exotic, clothed her in the glorious variety of their desires; now they shaped and reshaped her in a cruel series of variations on a single theme: *Be quiet, woman...*

"Reggie..." But Father Mike had turned to acknowledge her at last, his eyes burning through her like angry, red suns. *Swisha-bodda-whoosh!*, and her mouth was gone. She became a great, pale breast, swelling and swelling, spilling over the altar and into the aisle, toppling bridesmaids like bowling pins in her wake.

*She's drunk! The bitch is drunk*! Steve's voice drifted to her as if from far away. Drunk? What the hell was he seeing? Plain Linda Herman bouncing over the wedding party like some teal taffeta

beach ball? Were any two people seeing her the same, as they took turns humiliating her according to their own sadistic lusts?

Of course Steve would see her as her. He had no lust for her, never saw her as anything more than Linda the dowdy housewife, a possession like his car, his briefcase, his blessed reputation. She rolled to him, flattened him in the aisle, covering him whole with her pink, eye-like aureole, then rotated, sucking him up on top of her, his body a shield against the congregation's groping eyes. *Look hard, you bastard!* she commanded mouthlessly, *See me!*

*Swisha-bodda-whoosh!*, and she was back to herself, drab and breathless under Steve's weight, but whole again. She cropped him hard in the testicles, rabbit-kicked his writhing form under a pew, then sprinted for the side exit and out into the sightless, black safety of the night.

* * *

If Paul, the Mayor's son, hadn't meant for her to take the '68 Mustang, he should never have given her keys. It was small compensation, really, for all the entertainment she'd afforded him and the others, never considering that it might have been at her own expense. She thought of Steve carousing at the reception, drinking with his friends, framing her story by conniving story into a careful picture-box of insanity, painting himself the sympathetic victim, solidifying his precious reputation in the looking-glass world now shrinking away behind her in the rear view mirror. She raised her middle finger to the night and rammed the gas pedal into the floorboard.

The creatures of Sid's comic book fantasy world, Father Mike's Virgin, Reggie's sweet swans and belles and endless permutations of innocence offered up and taken... She'd wanted power, and she'd gotten it. But had she ever really been in control? Had she, herself, been so mesmerized by Mercuria's power that she had written off Linda Herman from the start, never even considering her own will or desires, what the singular appearance of Mercuria within Linda Herman might mean to herself - for herself? She had allowed herself

to be used, had used herself as callously as had the men she'd lusted to hold power over.

In the silence of the car, she felt Mercuria resting deep within her, a placid lake waiting for a breeze, a pool of liquid fire satisfied to bubble quietly until some focused will called her to erupt. As her thoughts touched Mercuria, she felt the power stir just a little, then settle again as a single tear spilled over onto her cheek.

Could it really be that simple? Had she simply never tried? Steve was right; she had been drunk, stupid drunk on an adolescent power trip, with all the clichéd self-doubt that entailed. But she was sobering now with every mile the deserted highway carried her beyond the mistakes of Mercuria's first weeks of life toward the discovery of her own will and the shaping of her own solid future - a future in which the only eyes that measured Linda Herman's worth and strength and beauty would be her own.

She laughed from a deep, no longer so well-hidden place as she passed the Albuquerque city limits sign and rocketed into suburbia. A few more miles and the road would break onto clear, white sands, sparkling like a million stars under the silver moon, then Paradise, and beyond that the winding mountain road that would take her up, up and away from the Land of Enchantment.

# Publication Credits

*A World In Edgewise* originally appeared in *The End: A Journal of Dark Literature*.

*Heritage* has not been previously published and is original to this volume.

*Or Memories Draped by the Tyrannical Spider* originally appeared in *Brood of Sycorax Magazine.*

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*The Return of Horselover Fat* originally appeared in the on-line anthology *The Palm Tree Garden of Philip K. Dick.*

*The Last Dinosaur* originally appeared in *Mystic Fiction Magazine*.

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*Missing Time, Friendly Fire* and *Mercuria, Rising* have not been previously published and are original to this volume.

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